☆星海社FICTIONS
一肇
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(Nitroplus)
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yoshitoshi ABe
美鶴木夜石は微笑まない
フェノメノ陸

Volume 6 Prologue

A lot of things—got cut off.

Sad things.

Painful things.

Unbeknownst to me, they had been scraped off before I realized it.

Lately, I've been unable to get rid of these feelings in the depths of my consciousness. And you might say, “Isn't it just fine? It's not a problem at all. It’s important to forget painful things.”

Ah, it’s not like I want to go through all the trouble of experiencing my negative past all over again. Of course, there are countless things I don't want to remember. But, that's not it. There are times when I end up thinking that the sad things, and the bitter things, are part of who I am.

I mean, if I only had happy memories, wouldn't you think that it was a threadbare life? You don't understand? Well, it's not like I'm making a problem out of it in particular. It's just, I can't accept that these feelings are scraped off without my knowledge. The fact that I've been through so much, and someone took it away from me without giving it substance, leaving only a tingling pain - it's just, just so empty.

I almost jump up in the middle of the night and scream, ‘Give it back’.

However, every time, someone would ask in return.

--You can have it back, but...

--Can you taste that sadness, that pain, once more?

I couldn’t answer immediately.

Because even though the memories of that pain, that sadness, are no more, the fact that it was so painful, and so agonizing, is etched into my body.

--That’s why, I couldn’t answer. No, I must have decided to use ‘couldn’t answer’ as a cover for ‘not answering’. In this way, I waited for the question to fade away.

I was a coward – and above all, a loser.

Case 13: Spiritual Paths

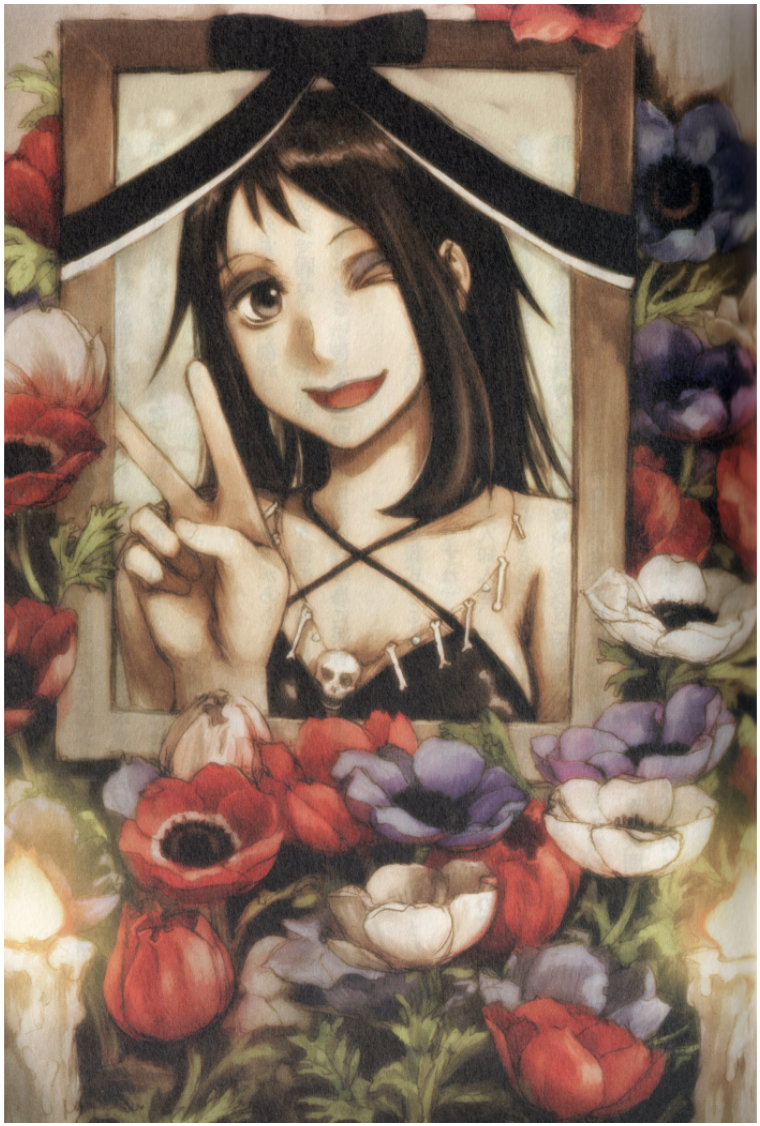
It was a clear winter morning.

Karasu-san—her real name being Yukiko Nadare on the family register, had silently been cremated.

After a simple ceremony had been held with just her family, the body that had lived in this world as ‘Karasu’, was reduced to beautiful ash. The girl contained in the funerary urn was so small, her long slender figure, glamorous body, beautiful black hair and large eyes – all traces of her face had already disappeared.

And, right now, I was staring at it in front of the altar at the back of the assembly hall in the annex of the funerary hall.

Her funerary urn was adorned with countless Anemone(Which Karasu-san loved before her death), and above it was a large photograph of her. I was worried that I would shamefully break down in tears when I stood before Karasu-san who ended up in ashes– however, I disappointingly betrayed that. Because, in the extra-large sized picture, Karasu-san had a broad grin on her face. She cutely winked with one eye, as if to say, “Well, I’ll be seeing the so-called other side first.” Her eyes twinkled with excitement as she said that, and she even made a peace sign. I was taken aback by that smile, and I had my jaw slightly open as I looked back at the outrageousness of that portrait, which was nothing at all like a portrait of a deceased person, when--



“Yo, Nagi-kun, it’s been a long time.”

I turned around after being called out, and there was Suu-san’s well-rounded smile. Like me, he was a regular of ‘Ikaigabuchi’, an old man who was one of the oldest members of the site, his primary business was being the owner of a liquor store.

“Wow, last time we met was in the previous offline meeting, huh?

How have you been doing? ...Haha. I guess you're not doing so well."

"Ahh… Haha. I'm fine."

I laughed so for the moment, but to be honest, a dull aching pain remained here and there. I stood there as a very painful figure, with both sides of my torso wrapped in a cast under my navy-blue suit, and a bandage on my right arm. I hadn't actually been cleared to leave the hospital yet, but I forced the doctor to expedite my discharge just for this day.

"But, it sure is amazing—this venue. No matter how you look at it, it's nothing like a funeral, and nothing like a memorial either."

I looked around at Suu-san's exclamatory words, and replied, "That's quite true."

There were countless people in the assembly hall. In addition to her friends, acquaintances, and the regulars from 'Ikaigabuchi', more than a hundred people had gathered, there were also her professional clients as a "fortune teller"—in short, company presidents, politicians, people from the backstreets, and countless others arrived one after the other. The rather large venue was completely filled.

And everyone had a radiant smile on their faces. In the first place, I didn't see anyone in mourning attire. There were people in jeans and T-shirts, biker men dressed in leather, and I even saw a woman wearing a party dress. If you entered this place without knowing anything about it, you might mistake it for a wedding party or something, and the atmosphere was so convivial that nowhere did it feel solemn or subdued or anything like that.

Right—to be precise, what was being held here today was not a 'funeral'. The hall with the tall ceiling was filled with lively Western rock and jazz music, and all kinds of snacks and drinks were set in one corner of the room, and above all, there was a flashy sign put up at the entrance to the hall that said, 'Farewell Party'.

"It seemed to have been in her will. She said, 'Please never remember me in tears'. Very much like her."

The plump liquor store owner spoke as he loosened his necktie and leaned against the wall with a wineglass in one hand.

“As such, I can only assume that Karasu-san did indeed realize the time of her death.”

“…Realized the time of her death?”

“Huh? Nagi-kun, You didn’t hear?”

No, I shook my head.

“Hmm, I see. Well, it’s a story all old timers of ‘Ikaigabuchi’ are aware of. In her high school days, she got involved in something strange and threw away her real name.”

“…Threw it away? Her real name?”

“I don’t know the details of what exactly happened. She would befuddle you by telling you that it’s better not to know, but it seems to have been a very dangerous incident. I heard that Karasu-san’s mother died because of it or something.”

With those words, I finally realized. The two men at the center of the hall who were politely bowing to the attendees one-by-one. They must have been Karasu-san’s father and brother. And there was indeed no sign of a mother-like figure near the serious-looking men.

“But it seems that Karasu-san herself didn’t believe she had escaped that incident by throwing away her name. That’s why she would always say it when she was drunk. She would say, 『I’m sure that one day, I’ll suddenly disappear from everyone's sight, but I never want you to grieve for me. 』

I hung my head down, not knowing how to respond to the story I had never heard before, when--

“I’ve heard it too.”

I heard a clear voice close by.

I turned my head to see Yukihito Kurimoto-kun in his school uniform,

bowing politely.

“Nagito-san, it’s been a long time.”

“Yo, have you been well?”

Yukihito Kurimoto-kun was the younger brother of Krishna-san, the manager of ‘Ikaigabuchi’, and was currently a first-year student in the Koumei university affiliated high school. He was handsome in every meaning of the word, and he gave me a worried look with his soft, light hair and well-groomed face, like that of Krishna-san.

“I’m fine of course, but—Nagi-kun, are your injuries alright?”

“Ah, somehow. Haha, it is how it is.”

I vigorously shook my left arm, the one that wasn’t bandaged down. But just by the vibration alone, my entire body creaked and let out a scream, Guh, I choked. The right elbow in particular hurt like hell, since it had scraped against concrete to the point where the bone was visible.

“Please don’t push yourself.”

Smiling like a spring breeze, Yukihito-kun straightened the black necktie around his neck.

“Ah, Yukihito-kun. Never mind that, you said you heard it too—you mean you heard the story of Karasu-san’s time of death?”

“Yes. Before. It’s….um, it’s from back when I was still troubled you see. I was told the story when I was made to see Karasu-san as a sort of counselling. She said, 『Someday, maybe very soon, I'll suddenly disappear, so please remember me.』 I thought she meant it as 『Don’t keep depending on me forever』, and after that, I began to think for myself a little.”

“Ah, to say that to a boy in puberty is harsh--”

Suu-san smiled, and Yukihito-kun gave an embarrassed smile in reply.

“Back then, I thought I was being pushed away, and I did indeed think that women were scary… but, now that she really has disappeared, I think she was trying to encourage me to stand on my own.”

Suu-san and I followed Yukihito-kun’s gaze as he looked back, and we gazed in the far-off distance at the smiling Karasu-san in the photograph.

However, Suu-san quickly let out a ‘Pfft’.

“That picture doesn't even bring a tear to my eyes.”

“Yes.”

I, too, couldn't help but smile.

However, I took a hard look at it, and thought once more—

That it was indeed a strange picture.

Regardless of being a lively meet that was called a ‘Farewell party’, it wasn’t just me who would recall Karasu-san midway through the conversation and be at a loss of what to say. There were moments when the reality of a ’person dying’ would stab at my heart, when my thoughts would end up stopping in their tracks. But when I would look up, that joking wink and smiling face would be looking down on me. At that moment, my sadness would dissipate, and I would suddenly realize that my heart became lighter. To the point where I would end up thinking that ‘dying’ meant going on a simple trip to a neighboring country.

“That picture must be a form of Karasu-san’s consideration.”

Suu-san’s voice was a little hoarse as he spoke.

“Anyone who can be somber in the face of that foolish picture must be really dark from their roots.”

Thereupon, I realized the presence of a small shadow working diligently in front of the drinks counter.

It was indeed Krishna-san, my senpai in university and the manager of the occult site 'Ikaigabuchi', to whom I owed a great debt of gratitude. She was handing out drinks to the visitors who came one after the other with a smile on her face. She was dressed in a black and white suit with only her glasses being in color, but—

"I guess she's the one who has it the hardest."

Suu-san's words suddenly made me realize.

"She must be really depressed at having to close down 'Ikaigabuchi'."

"Ah…about that, has it already been decided? Why does she have to close it down? I don't think Karasu-san would be happy about that."

"…Ngh."

After taking a sip of the wine, Suu-san hesitated for a while over whether to say something or not, before eventually telling us.

"I believe it happened a few years ago. Someone involved in 'Ikaigabuchi' died. Well, he was a reckless guy who kept venturing into haunted spots on his own regardless of whether Krishna-san stopped him or not."

I suddenly felt mortified, like he was talking about me.

"In the end, he lost his senses and got run over by a train. At that time Krishna-san was so distraught that she made a great big fuss, saying she was going to quit and close the website. But, the one who stopped her from closing the site back then was Karasu-san. She acted quite out of character back then, you know. The normally outgoing and playful Raven-san wrapped her hands around Krishna-san's cheeks and shouted at her, 『Are you listening, Krishna-chan? Don't focus only on those who are hopelessly delusional and turn your eyes away from the countless ghosts who could be saved!』 Well, Krishna-san changed her mind thanks to that – but, the question of whether or not to continue 'Ikaigabuchi' must have always been swirling inside that small body of hers."

"……"

“’Ikaigabuchi’ is different from your average occult website. There are times when articles go beyond the realm of just being thrilling and enjoyable ghost stories, when they have to be investigated seriously. And, although we can't understand why – the information on ‘Ikaigabuchi’ we can’t see is always secretly sealed away by Krishna-san alone. If she made that decision after accepting Karasu-san’s words, then there’s nothing we can do as mere visitors to the site.”

…Ah, that was true.

I took a glance at Krishna-san’s small back once more.

Information on S ranked haunted places was also locked and stored on Krishna-san’s computer. It could not be published, nor could it be erased, it continued to exist as disturbing data on her computer, and having ended up gaining that information, it was inside her even now, wriggling in the dark.

“Ah, dammit…I’m really.”

Without thinking about how tiring that strangeness must have been, I was only thinking about myself once more. I only wished for the preservation of this extremely precious community -- of this gathering of so many strange people.

I felt helplessly sorry.

I looked at the Krishna-san working hard in the distance, straightened my posture on the spot, and made a deep, deep bow.

○

“UKyooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

…Umm, right.

Incidentally, the person emitting this strange, high-tension voice was the aforementioned Krishna-san, aka Shiina Kurimoto.

She had a baby face and looked to be no more than a middle school student, but at the age of twenty-one, she was the president as well as the manager of one of Japan's largest occult websites. And now, the farewell party for Karasu-san had been upgraded to the regular year-end party for Ikaigabuchi, as well as a special farewell thanks from everyone because the site was being closed; Everyone had moved to the banquet hall on the second floor of a popular izakaya behind the station.

“—Hey, hey, do you drink? Are you drinking, Nagi-kun!?”

She slithered up to me on all fours on the tatami mat with her face flushed red, but she hadn’t actually drunk a drop of alcohol. In other words, Krishna-san had no disposition for alcohol at all, seeing as how she transformed into a truly spectacular drunkard just by smelling alcohol like this.

“I don’t drink. I’m still only nineteen.”

“Why arench’ya drinking! Nineteen is no different from twenty!”

“Krishna-san, you’re slurring.”

“Fudging the subject! I dun’ know nuthin about nineteen or twenty!”

“The wall that separates the two is higher than any other age…”

“The high’er the wall the bett’r the pay off! Can ya still say yer a man? Are ya a man? Doncha think a girl would swoon all ova’ the face of a boy who makes that challenge?”

“Um, no, you’re getting way off topic there…”

Thereupon—

“K-u-ri-mo-to! K-u-ri-mo-to!”

The regulars of Ikaigabuchi began chanting vigorously and perplexingly in unison. As soon as they started, Krishna-san stood up

with a beaming smile on her face and started jumping up and down.

“When she’s encouraged like this, Krishna-san is really funny.”

Without a moment’s delay, Zippo-san, one of the regulars, whispered in a small voice in my ear.

“And, it’s a real feast for the eyes.”

Harley-san whispered briefly, and I looked once more to see--- Oohhh. Krishna-san’s bust that had matured much more than necessary, was bonging vigorously up and down, left and right, each time she would jump up and down.

“…Fuwoo,”

I was on the verge of a nosebleed.

“I can’t bear it.”

“It’s impossible to bear it.”

“The thing under the clothes is, how should I say…?”

“It's so vivid in my mind that I can almost dream about it.”

Not noticing the passionate sighs of the men, Krishna-san danced a rather incomprehensible dance with a folding fan in hand, given to her by someone else.

“Come to think of it, Karasu-san was the one who came up with this performance.”

At someone's words, I took another look around the group of red-faced drunks who were clustered around the tatami matted space of around 50 sqm. It was, without a doubt, the usual offline meeting of ‘Ikaigabuchi’. However, Karasu-san was not present there anymore. Even though she was nowhere to be seen, the image of her clapping to the beat and rolling around in laughter still came vividly to mind.

“That person was always a genius at stirring up the place and getting things going.”

“But, she was also a genius at spotting the person who was down and being there for them.”

“She would be the nice person that would tell them exactly what they needed to hear at the time.”

Those mixed words of sorrowful farewells, gratitude and affection filled the hall---

And I realized. Karasu-san was loved by everyone. And knowing Karasu-san, she would have loved everyone in return, and she loved this kind of ‘Ikaigabuchi’. She treasured them from the depths of her heart: the bold nature of the people who would even enjoy the depths of the world beyond despite its vast darkness.

“She might have been happy…”

I unconsciously ended up mouthing those words, and Yukihito-kun besides me, cocked his head in puzzlement, so I explained in an embarrassed manner.

“…No, umm. That bastard Sako once told me that the strongest attribute in this world is to be a true masochist. The type of attribute that goes beyond just being thickheaded, that it can turn this hopeless world into pleasure alone. I didn’t understand it at the time – but, now that I recall Karasu-san like this, I think I get it. Of course, I miss her too. I mean, I still can’t believe it, and I probably won’t be able to accept her death for many years to come. There are many things I don't understand, such as the fact that she threw away her name, or that she carried with her something so heavy she could never tell people about in detail. But, Karasu-san tried to enjoy even that, and in fact did succeed in enjoying it, somehow…I understand that completely now.”

In response, Yukihito-kun gave a small nod and then a small smile.

“She, was really quite cool.”

“Aah.”

“She was tough in some ways, but she was smart, humorous, and cute.”

“…….Hmm, Yukihito-kun, is it possible that…?”

“…Eh?”

“Is it possible that you had a crush on Karasu-san?”

“…S, sorry, but.”

A bashfulness slipped in and out of view behind the mask the honor student wore, to which I replied.

“I mean, I’m the same. Or rather, it’s the same for everyone in ‘Ikaigabuchi’.”

Reflexively, I poured some more orange juice in Yukihito-kun’s glass, and toasted it together with my glass of cola. *Clink* A pleasant sounding noise chimed out, and at the same time, for some reason, I thought of Akane Nanamori, who had passed away at the same time.

That child would suffer no longer, right?

Was she missed, appreciated and given a warm send off like Karasu-san?

When I was hospitalized, Akane’s parents came to visit me once, but I don’t remember their faces anymore.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the wall alone, with the glass in one hand. I ignored the tumult around me and was on the verge of recalling something else that was important— when I suddenly opened my eyes. I looked around the tumultuous drunken crowd in the banquet hall once more.

In the corner of the tatami room that was around 50 sqm in space, where everyone was merry and making a ruckus— was a vacant seat.

“Say, that chair…”

I asked Yukihito-kun. “Is someone late?”

In response, ‘Eh’, Yukihito-kun looked at me and after that, “A…ah, ummm that’s right.” He nodded.

Something didn't feel right with the way he vaguely answered that question—

"But, it's that you see—"

A carefree and inarticulate voice was raised up from somewhere.

"It's quite boring if we all keep repeating that Karasu-san was beautiful, funny, and wanted to get married and so forth."

The party soon switched to everyone offering their dedications to Karasu-san. I looked to see that the petite, bob haired occult site manager, who had been dancing and jumping up and down just now, had rolled over and fallen asleep next to me.

"Won't it be better for someone to tell a ghost story as a farewell?"

"That sounds good."

"Well then, allow me."

"No, no, let me do it."

What was wrong with these people? I was appalled, but it couldn't be helped since this was the basic nature of the 'Ikaigabuchi' offline meetings that Karasu-san loved so much.

"Ah, speaking of ghost stories."

The gentleman who butted in at that point went by the handle name of 'Professor', he was rumored to be a professor at a certain private university.

"The story, 'The Overlapping house' that was on 'Ikaigabuchi' a while ago was interesting."

"Ah, it really was. I mean, six overlapping is a lot."

…Overlapping? Six?

I cocked my head in puzzlement. I hadn't checked the 'Ikaigabuchi' forums recently, so I didn't know what they were talking about.

“Sorry, what’s this story about? What do you mean by six?”

“Umm, you know about spiritual paths, right? There was a place where six of them overlapped.”

--Spiritual paths.

If I remember correctly, I had heard of them from Krishna-san once before. Firstly, you look up the location of old temples(apparently cemeteries, graves and memorial towers were also included) on old maps, and then connect the temples to each other with a line. The points where the temple lines overlapped were called ‘Kegarechi’[1], and points where ‘Kegarechi’ overlapped on to ‘Kegarechi’ were said to be ‘spiritual paths’. The reason for this is that spirits who are sure they had to go to their graves after they died wander between houses and gravesites.

“A little while ago, Kaiko-san[2] got a hold of the old maps of this area.”

Suu-san spoke with a red face.

“So, to pass the time, he tried to connect temples, small shrines, and the ruins of all kinds of memorial towers with a line. By doing that, he found a dangerous place where six lines overlapped with each other. When he checked it out, he found that it was an empty house again. He didn’t know how it came to be empty, but when he indirectly asked the people in the neighborhood, strange stories kept coming up. Stories of a woman peeping through a gap in the shoji on the second floor when no one was supposed to be living there, or hearing someone’s laughter in the middle of the night, or a sharp metallic sound ringing out at times, and so on.”

A shiver suddenly ran through my back.

“That is probably close to the stationery shop at the back of city hall.”

“Ahh, is it the shop which always has its shutters closed?”

“Was it a stationery shop before?”

Those kinds of conversations took place with Suu-san at the center, and I interrupted.

“How do you know about it?”

“Hey, hey, don’t be looking down on liquor stores, Nagi-kun. A liquor store with a large delivery network is familiar with the map of the city and the family structures, and rumors keep coming in even if you don’t like ‘em. If you wanna ask for directions on a trip, you ask a taxi first, and a liquor store second.”

“But.”

Thereupon Harley-san cut in the conversation.

“When the thread was blowing up with discussions about the nature of the sound and the laughter – the entire thread ended up disappearing.”

“Disappearing? Why is that?”

“Why, you ask…it’s obvious.”

Harley-san motioned his chin right next to me. At that moment, a happy-looking Krishna-san had rolled over in her sleep, and ended up using my knee as a pillow.

…Ah, I see.

That meant that after a long time, an S ranked haunted place had appeared.

In short, it meant that it was ‘the worst kind of place people shouldn’t be involved in’ on the occult website ‘Ikaigabuchi’, and the manager of ‘Ikaigabuchi’ couldn’t allow such dangerous information to spread unabated, and had the authority to suddenly delete the thread itself.

“Well, we even identified the place. Our shenanigans might have gone too far.”

Harley-san spoke after gulping down the gin rock in his hand.

“But, Nagi-kun. Actually…”

Suu-san chuckled as he lowered his voice.

“There's been talk of people volunteering to go there next Saturday late at night. You're welcome to—”

When—suddenly.

“…Ah, don’t…”

Shameless thoughts were triggered in my imagination somehow thanks to Krishna-san’s sleepy voice. She suddenly got up, and whether she had grasped the situation or not, she sharply rebuked her surroundings in a loud cute voice.

“...I said it already! You must not! I told you, didn’t I!?”

Although she had a sleepy expression on with traces of drool on her face, she was still indeed the president of ‘Ikaigabuchi’.

The red-faced drunkards who were present straightened themselves, and bowed down in unison, “We’re sorry”.

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A face like a Noh mask.

The man I met at the front gate of the university the following day could only be described as such.

I was walking along the road and saw a limousine with tinted glass parked next to a row of Zelkova trees in front of the main gate of Koumei university, and as I walked past it, I stared at it and thought to myself, ‘What an amazing car’. When suddenly, the rear passenger door opened, and that man stepped out. The man was tall and lean, his hair was brushed back, and he looked good in a stylish navy-blue suit. However, apart from that, it was as if there was nothing to

remember him by, like he had no distinct features, and had a strange face which made his age hard to discern.

“You must be Nagito Yamada-kun, right?”

He called out to me in a low tone of voice, and I replied ‘Yes’ back to him, but from there, the man didn’t even try to follow up with any comment. He merely looked down at me expressionlessly, like a robot. I too looked back at the face of that noh-faced man – but it was as if I couldn’t get a read on his emotions at all, although for some reason, I had a feeling I saw his vacant gaze somewhere before.

“Umm…Who might you be?”

I asked as if to go against his heavy, intimidating air.

“You’ve been taking care of *that*.”

The man spoke in a manner where his lips didn’t move.

“…That?”

“My adopted daughter as per the family register.”

…….?

I was flabbergasted, not quite knowing what he was talking about, when the man turned towards the Koumei institute.

He then took out an expensive looking silver colored lighter along with a foreign cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Of course, he didn’t bother to ask me, and I didn’t have time to tell him that this was a no-smoking area of the campus.

“It’ll soon be a year huh? It’ll be a long time for that to have stayed in the same place.”

“Um.”

A sweet fragrance drifted in the surroundings, and I asked while choking a little.

“Who is this girl you’re talking about?”

In response, the man turned his body slightly towards me and shifted his focus to me once more. He stared at me motionlessly once more with eyes like holes in a Noh mask. It felt as if he might have laughed slightly, but it might have just been my imagination.

The man exhaled a sweet ectoplasmic smoke from his mouth, and silently took out a business card from his pocket. I ended up grabbing it reflexively, but all that was written there was his name, ‘美鶴木志洲’ and a phone number. There was no job title, address or anything else. So I had no idea who he was.

“Shi…Shishu Mitsuru…gi?”

“It’s read as Shijima Mitsurugi. It doesn't matter, you won't get a chance to call me by my first name.”

He spoke in a low whisper, but—something rang inside me hearing the word ‘Mitsurugi’.

Mitsurugi? A girl--? Huh…?

As I opened every single drawer in my memory, searching for the identity of the string of intense nostalgia, anxiety, slight fear and countless other emotions that came from that name, the man looked at me as if he were licking up all my emotional transitions.

“It seems you’ve *forgotten everything completely*.”

“Forgotten--?”

I was about to ask, ‘Just who the hell are you?’ But I stopped as the man tsked at the back of his mouth. I felt disgusted by his presence, as if he were disciplining a misbehaving dog, as if he was used to always making people follow his orders.

“If you've forgotten, you shouldn't force yourself to remember. It's a capacity that's not given much importance you know, to forget, but it's one of the most useful weapons of a healthy human being. It was an incident that people shouldn't know about, and your involvement in it was like a random accident. There are fatalists in this world who

connect everything to the inevitable, but you don't want to live that way because it's exhausting.”

The man who had the image of being silent and expressionless like a robot suddenly became talkative.

However, was he embarrassed of himself? He once again fell into silence for a while after that. I didn't know what I should do at that point. I was troubled with something hazy hanging over my heart. If I were to take stock of things--and, if this man wasn't mistaking me for someone else, then I knew of a girl named ‘Mitsurugi’ and had completely forgotten about her. The question was, who was she, what relationship did I have with her, and how did I end up forgetting her?

Was it because of the accident? The doctor said I had hit my head hard, so was it an after effect of that?

I was absent mindedly lost in my thoughts,

“Are you still going to repeat it?”

The man muttered a few inexplicable words.

“... Good grief, it's so difficult to anticipate or deduce. It would be fine if you would just act obediently -- but you're still going to repeat it? Just like the disciples of the witch?”

“Hey, what do you mean by the witch?”

I asked, and thereupon, the man seemed to have realized that he had let a part of his thoughts slip out of his mouth. For the first time, something resembling emotion appeared on the man's face, and he clicked his tongue in disgust.

“A long time ago—there was said to have been a university for witches.”

“...Huh?”

“There, the disciples of the witch would be made to do the same thing over and over again —a recurring theme of my professor when I was a university student. I was told this persistently when I was a

student. I guess he wanted to tell me to get back to the basics.”

He spoke that much as if he had accomplished his responsibility to explain, then the man turned his sharp jaw up to the heavens.

“At any rate, I just wanted to see the face of the one that took care of that.”

Saying that, he extinguished the cigarette in a black leather ash disposer, and opened the door of the black limousine. After he climbed in, he looked back at me once more.

“I'm glad you’ve forgotten everything. You saved me a lot of trouble.”

“…What do you mean by trouble?”

In response, the man gave one cold look at me,

“If you’re unfortunate enough to remember something – call me immediately.”

Thereafter, he once again reverted to a low, mechanical tone, bereft of any emotion.

“Next time, I will come to erase it.”

○

I had forgotten something.

Or rather, I had forgotten someone.

Could it be that I had lost part of my memories since the accident? No, the doctors didn't say anything like that. I woke up in the hospital room that day, and next to me was Krishna-san, and even that bastard Sako was there, then I found out that Akane Nanamori had died, and that Karasu-san had died – and after that, what happened? After the man had left, I closed my eyes with my finger

stuck in my head, as I desperately traced back into my memories.

It felt... As if I had screamed in the hospital room. That's right, I remember seeing something and trembling with fear, and then I screamed. The shrill voice from that time still clung to the back of my ears. I shouted at someone, “You monster”. At the same time, a tremendous pitch-black feeling of regret seeped deeply into my chest. But that was as far as it went. I have no memory of what happened after that. I couldn’t recall who it was that I had called a ‘monster’. They had vanished from my memory as if they had been sealed away.

I suddenly got scared and started running.

I jumped onto my bicycle, which I had parked in the bike park, and hurried back to my apartment.

The Houdate apartment building was about a 20-minute bike ride away from my university--my crib in Tokyo that Karasu-san had introduced to me: a cheap 10 square meter apartment with an attached loft. I opened the lock and tumbled inside, and focused my eyes on every corner of the apartment.

Sunlight poured into the apartment through the half open curtains, and dust faintly glittered in the light. Familiar clothes, luggage, and bags were carelessly thrown about in the living room. The same state they were in when I left in the morning. I looked around the entire apartment, and I noticed that this apartment had a loft. For some reason, I hesitated to go up there, but after gulping once, I placed one foot on the ladder. I climbed up slowly, step by step, and the moment I looked inside, something glittered faintly in the corner of my memory. However, it disappeared before it could take shape, as if it sunk away somewhere.

The loft was cramped, with a low ceiling and a wooden floor of about 5 sqm.

Of course, nobody was there.

Strangely enough, there was nothing there.

...Why, did I not store my luggage here?

...Why, was this space alone so empty?

And right now, why was I—

Crying this much?

These tears that overflowed from both my eyes without stopping, who were they for?

In the end, my yearend holidays passed by without returning to my parents' home, and I spent them just doing my part time job.

My father and sister kept nagging me to 'Come back home', but I felt that if I returned home, something precious that was on the verge of disappearing from my memories would be lost forever, so I stubbornly stayed in Tokyo.

When I was hospitalized, my elder sister was the only one who came running, 『You little… there are limits to paid holidays you know, and it takes a high level of confidence to take them so don't keep worrying me!』 She was shouting at me about that, but I was honestly happy. However, I thought she would stay for a while, but perhaps because she saw Krishna-san close by, she became relieved, 『Sorry for always causing you trouble』 as she bowed her head, 『Well, see you Nagi. I have very few paid holidays left. See you on New Year's.』 She ended up leaving with those words. Well…that's how things went, and she must have thought that I would head back home for the new year as a matter of course. On New Year's Eve, when I called them to tell them that I wouldn't be coming back after all, my father and sister grappled for the receiver of the black rotary telephone to chaotically shout at me. But my elder sister, perhaps sensing that my voice had a heavy, cold emotion behind it—suddenly asked.

『…Hey. Are you okay?”』

I fell silent, and my sister also fell silent for a while.

『….Umm…Nee-chan, I…』

When I finally began to open up,

『No, it’s fine.』 I was simply told.

『You don’t have to say it. You’ve always been a wuss and a crybaby, but when your switch gets turned on, you become impossibly reckless. At any rate, you went too far, and things became complicated, right?』

『……..』

『I mean, I'll only say this once so you'd better remember it, Nagi. If you think it's seriously dangerous, call me. Call me right away. Without hesitation. Even if it’s dawn or midnight, I’ll come running straight away.』

I felt a prick at the back of my nose.

『But I only have one day of paid vacation left, so.』

『….Alright. Thanks, sis.』

That was all I managed to reply with. My sister was still on the other end of the line, she said something to pacify my father, and the call went dead. My sister must have sensed that something serious was going on. I had a vague feeling, that if I didn’t do that something now, that it would end up changing shape into something that could not be undone. Even just putting it into words would be enough for it to shift and become something else, then I wouldn’t be able to follow it anymore. I was just thankful that she was able to understand my urgent thoughts.

Yes, I had, indeed, forgotten someone. It felt as if that accident wouldn’t be over until I remembered them properly. The bandages had been taken off, and my right elbow which was in bad shape had healed quite a bit, but a stinging pain would still come at times. I

couldn't help but feel that the pain was Karasu-san being angry at me. In her case, she wouldn't yell at me, but she would instead smile and place her hand on my shoulder, and say something like, "What are you doing? Get yourself together". Whenever my elbow ached at my part time job, when I was alone in my apartment, when I was wandering around town, those were the times I felt Karasu-san's marked presence.

I, myself, wanted to get it together. But how could I tell anyone about these vague signs of lacking memory? Of course, I talked to Krishna-san about my situation in as much detail as I could and asked her. However, the baby-faced occult website manager simply said, "It's because you've been in an accident recently", and she scolded me, "You have to go back home and show your folks that you're safe."

Krishna-san seemed busy during this period. It seemed she had decided to continue to graduate school after graduating. I hadn't seen her at university much recently. The top page of the largest occult website in Japan had changed to 'Under construction'. The message board where everyone excitedly talked together about ghosts, and the pages dedicated to investigating paranormal phenomena of the past were no more. At times, I would catch sight of 'Ikaigabuchi' members on occult threads of a certain large message board, but compared to 'Ikaigabuchi', the posts there were a little ill-mannered, and they almost never went into deep thought. I guessed that everyone would eventually end up nostalgic about how cozy 'Ikaigabuchi' was. Gradually, I began to see less and less posts on the Internet from people who seemed to know each other.

Then one day-- my neighboring room, room 101, suddenly became vacant.

Some contractors suddenly came and carried away the large collection of Krishna-san's creepy things. After that, I peeped inside a little when the interior designers entered: the wallpaper had already been reupholstered and disinfected, and the talismans and the shimenawa had disappeared. I had my doubts about whether the negative energy left behind by all those relics would disappear by doing that, but I suddenly thought to myself then.

All the memories I had slowly accumulated in the span of the past

year: exciting memories, memories that were terrifying yet nostalgic, they were slowly being swept away by the wind. I felt like someone was saying to me: “They’ll come back to you naturally.”

My heart didn't clear, and a month passed, and then two— it was March, when the plums blossom.

It was the time of year when freshmen filled with hope would soon be entering university in large numbers. I took a peep at an internet occult forum I hadn't looked at in a while, and found that post.

『I found a haunted mansion.』

That was the title of the ghost story. The contents were a record of the exploration of an abandoned house. 『It was a two-story Japanese style house that has been empty for a long time.』 『Nevertheless, laughter can be heard late at night.』 『Someone was peeping through a tear in the shoji on the second floor.』 『Something like a metallic sound would ring out at times.』 I laid down in my room and continue to read until late at night, when I suddenly had a flashback.

Come to think of it, in the farewell drinking party for ‘Ikaigabuchi’, wasn’t something like a ‘metallic sound’ mentioned in someone's ghost story? That's right, someone -- or rather, a woman - was peeping through the shoji on the second floor when that story was told. I intently continued to follow the letters as the strange congruent nature of the two stories clawed at the back of my head. It seemed it was an abandoned house where no one had lived for a long time, and luggage was strewn everywhere as if they had run off in the night. In the back of the house was a Buddhist family Chapel, and a child was said to be there. I didn't know how authentic it was, but it seemed that you shouldn't look at the child, or so it said.

The latter half was a little different, but wasn’t this the ‘Overlapping house’ that came up as a topic at that time. Based on researching locations on an old map, it was a house built in a place where six ‘spiritual paths’ overlapped.

I sat up before I realized.

A terrible, damp sweat welled down my back, down my sides.

I read through it once more, but the location wasn't mentioned anywhere. However, back then Suu-san and the others…. that's right, they said something about a ruined stationery store at the back of City Hall.

My throat stung with thirst, and I gulped once. My heart throbbed violently like it was about to break.

More so than fear, it was as if I alone ended up finding the key to an unopened treasure chest -- and I had a hunch that something precious was inside the treasure box that I needed to take back.

"—Say, don't you want to go and take a look?"

I swung back in surprise, feeling as if someone had suddenly whispered into my ear.

However, there was nobody in the room. I had been alone in the room since the beginning. All I could hear was the faint sound of cars on the main road outside.

Without pause, I shoved my phone in my jumper pocket. Then I suddenly came up with the idea to take a pocket light out from my luggage. I checked to see if it worked, pocketing it as well, and flew out of my apartment.

Even though spring was approaching, it was still quite cold and dark outside. And it was almost three o'clock in the morning, when the darkness would be at its deepest.

In the cold air, I sped my bike towards that house.

○

“Man…just where is this so-called stationery shop?”

It was quite suspicious for a young man to be wandering around alone in a residential area late at night. What would I say if I came across a patrolling officer? As my thoughts swirled on such things, I continued to intently search for that house with my hands in my jacket pocket. It was hard to move quickly, so I parked my bicycle in the city hall bicycle parking. After that, I wandered around the residential area on foot for about thirty minutes, but I couldn’t find a building that looked like a stationery shop anywhere. In the first place, weren’t stationery shops supposed to be closer to schools? No, did it go under because it wasn’t close to one? As I walked along thinking such things, I suddenly crossed paths with some students who were messing about on their way home. They looked at me suspiciously, but I somehow managed to hang my head down and passed them. I felt an awfully lot like a criminal.

I stopped in my tracks for the time being, and carefully recalled the conversation back in the farewell party. ‘Behind City Hall’ was definitely in this area. So, the stationery shop that went under…no, someone mentioned another characteristic---ah, that’s right. Someone said something like, 『The shop which always has its shutters closed』. When suddenly-- I caught sight of a small building with gray shutters. It was a building I had simply passed by many times thinking it was a garage.

“…Hey, is this it?”

I stepped back a bit, and looked at the right side of the building. It was a modern ready-made home two stories tall. The first and second floor still had their lights switched on. I could sense the presence of people from outside. Was this not it? The moment I shifted my gaze to the left side of the building where the shutters were down—a shiver ran down my spine.

Beyond the darkness, I saw the shadow of a deserted Japanese house

that was even darker.

Weeds were thickly overgrown behind the fence that was no longer maintained. Through the frosted glass next to the brown door, I realized that the interior was pitch dark. I looked up at the second floor but couldn't see properly thanks to the window being obscured by a torn shoji. As I was about to turn my eyes to the tear in the shoji, something cold crawled up my legs.

I averted my gaze. Because I suddenly remembered the story of the 'woman peeping'. I gulped once, and checked around to make sure nobody was around, opened the rusted door, and made my way through the garden stones to the front door. I tried peeping into the mailbox that was installed on the wall of the house and saw that it was chock-full of pamphlets. They had gotten wet, dried and torn, giving the impression that no one had been inside for quite some time now. Thereafter, I gently placed my hand on the front door, and tried pulling it once. Naturally, the door was locked and wouldn't budge.

For some reason, I was relieved.

I didn't have the guts as an occult maniac to break locks and intrude into abandoned buildings. I felt as if I had checked the door in search of a reason, that if I couldn't get in, there was nothing I could do.

--Let's go back before someone finds me.

I told that to myself as I turned my back to the door, when suddenly--

I heard a grating *clink* sound ring out from somewhere.

With a start, I stopped in my tracks and looked back in the direction of the house.

--It can't be, a metallic sound?

Holding my breath, I focused my concentration on the interior of the house once more on the spot. But I didn't hear it again.

I saw the headlights of a car approaching me from the distance, so I quickly lowered my posture and hid under the fence. At the same

time, I heard what sounded like people talking. It seemed it was a parent and child this time. A young mother was walking with her child hand in hand. I felt relieved and at the same time annoyed at the lack of common sense of a mother walking with her child in the middle of the night. No—people all have their own reasons. I mean a student was sitting here crouching in the middle of the night in front of a person's front door, and I'm sure there must be single mothers out there who are trying their best to raise their children.

At any rate, I would easily end up being found out if a passerby were to peep in from the street. So I had no choice but to stay low as I steadily followed along the fence and made my way to the back of the house.

There, I found a place that was right around the size to be called a rear garden. There was a small pond that had no more water left, and a stone hanging lantern covered in moss. I hid myself behind the hanging lantern.

…Ahh, just what was I doing?

I thought as I bit my lip. Wasn't I just like a thief, crouching down in someone's garden in the middle of the night? I was surrounded by houses, and could easily be caught if anyone looked my way from some window. If I got reported, it would undoubtedly become a police matter.

--Let's just go back. Let's just go back home.

When I ordered my feet to do that, those words suddenly appeared in my head.

『But you're still going to repeat it? Just like the disciples of the witch?』

Those were the words uttered by that stranger in front of the

university that day.

That unknown noh faced-man of unknown age who stepped out of the limousine said that there used to be a university for witches in the past somewhere, and that the disciples of the witches devoted themselves to repeating something over and over again. So –what was that all about? What did he mean by ‘going back to the basics’? What did those words mean to that man, and why did they resonate so strangely within me? In the first place, just what was that man…? I didn’t have any acquaintances who would show up in a limousine, and I didn’t recall any daughter of h—

Thereupon, a shadow suddenly emerged in my head.

…It was a person.

A black silhouette – I didn’t know who it was.

But they stared at me forlornly, and continued to whispered something repeatedly.

“….Who….?”

Forgetting that I was brazenly intruding in someone else's garden, I reached my hand beyond my memory.

“…Who are you? Hey, are you related to that man? What does the university of witches mean? Just what are the disciples repeating there?”

Of course, I had not wished for a clear reply. I didn’t expect an answer.

However,

(That was, to search for the origin of names.)

“….Eh?”

From somewhere, I heard the clear voice of a young girl, like a ringing bell.

(The Scholomance university of magic – a legendary university said to have existed somewhere on the Balkan Peninsula in ancient times. There, the disciples of the witch only had one thing to do. That was to research the real names of all events and creatures in the world and their history.)

“W-who—is it?”

Flustered, I turned around, but there was no one there. Only the faint light of the moon poured down on the dimly lit courtyard.

Before I realized, a blue-white crescent moon peeked out between the clouds. It was such a beautiful moon that for a moment it seemed as if the moon itself had called out to me. A liquid darkness poured down from the moon, blue and azure, and filled my surroundings. And, I could feel the presence of someone right beside me. Someone I couldn’t see, but whose presence was strong and nostalgic.

“…Is someone—there?”

I asked the question with a trembling voice and white breath to my surroundings, but there was no answer.

However, that presence was markedly there, beside me. There was a slight warmth in the midst of the crisp winter air.

Tears gradually welled up from the depths of my eyes.

“I…know you.”

In the stillness of the night, my sobbing voice leaked out.

“I’m supposed to know you, but… why did I forget everything…?”

The presence did not answer the question.

Only the sound of an unknown insect filled the surroundings.

(Say, did you hear that?)

However, after a short period, I was asked in return.

(…It's that sound again.)

Thereupon, I realized.

Once more, from somewhere---no, from inside the house, *Clink* I heard a metallic sound ring out.

(Even though no one is living inside this house.)

(That sound...)

(It continues to ring out from somewhere in this house.)

My vision blurred more and more as the voice softly reached my ears.

Before I realized, I had vacantly raised my face, and stared at the second floor of the premises.

On the other side of the window.

The torn-up hole of the shoji – the darkness.

From there, something looked down upon me with a hollow gaze.

I was seized with the thought that the ground under my feet swayed, and the dots of my vision were becoming coarser.

I wondered if it was all a dream.

Could it be that I was still in a hospital bed?

A dream, a dream, a dream…Ah, that's right, everything felt like a dream. I used to think that the source of my fears was the dream mansion I saw again and again—And, I thought I had crawled out of there, but could it be that I was still dreaming? This was a dream where I stood in someone else's garden, a dream where someone else's voice echoed despite me being the only one present.

The moment I thought that, tears spilled down my face; There was no other conclusion to be made except that.

"…I'm still…"

Was I still broken? Could I not tell reality from fiction?

In that moment, something cold touched my hand. And I understood that it was someone's hand.

(That's not it.)

The whisper of the young girl sounded in my ear.

"…Not it? Then?"

I heard a rustling sound, and the invisible young girl stood up.

She slowly approached the deserted house as if stepping on the overgrown weeds.

……Ah.

"…W, wait for me."

I stood up.

"What do you mean by that's not it? It's obviously strange, isn't it? I can't see you. Despite that I can still hear your voice. I can even understand what you're saying…"

(Reality and fiction—there are no humans in this world that can clearly distinguish that boundary.)

“……”

(The reason why is because humans live in their minds, and the world the mind believes in is the one and only reality.)

Those words made me feel shaky on my feet.

The world the mind believes in—that’s right, it’s always been like that. When confronted with something unbelievable or an impossible phenomenon, the ‘common sense’ present at the very heart of one's psyche becomes unstable. It begins to doubt: Just what was the ‘common sense’ that shaped our everyday lives? That is the greatest common experience, what you would call everyday law. ‘Common sense’ is a collection of ideas that are accumulated over the course of a person's long life that make things go smoothly. However, in rare instances, individuals appear who transcend that. They are called heretics, abnormal, and in net slang, ‘denpas’. However, was that really the case? Could you say that they were wrong? Didn’t we deny their theories and ostracize them to escape the fear of our own ‘common sense’ collapsing? Didn’t we merely place a lid on the things that were suspicious just to keep our peace?

To live in accordance with ‘common sense’—that would be far easier, and the smart thing to do. However, that was the same as being stagnant. It takes courage to break out of stagnation. You had to face the insurmountable fear directly, and strike it head on. It was also a fight against people’s prejudices. It was easy to run away from that. It would be easy to avert your eyes and forget about it. It would be easy to pretend that it never happened. However, even if you lost your memories, and ignored it with your head, your heart wouldn’t be deceived. And now, my heart was—

Resonating with something forgotten.

Right, it was resonating with you who I couldn’t see.

Before I realized—

I stood up, and reached my hand towards the void.

The tip of my hand touched someone’s cold hand; Someone’s eyes

glittered bewitchingly.

‘Welcome to the world on this side.’ Is what I felt I was told.

○

--This was crazy.

I was doing something completely insane. I was breaking into someone else’s house in the middle of the night, and talking to someone I couldn’t see.

No one would believe me if I talked to them about this, and they surely wouldn’t understand either. But despite that, I still couldn’t give up for some reason. I was helplessly afraid, yet helplessly excited. It felt as if my rightful place was here, beyond this darkness.

Both of us(In reality it might have just been me, but I dare say so) entered the house through the verandah. The sliding storm shutter had corroded, and easily came off with a little a bit of force. From there, we climbed down to the carpet that felt moist with our shoes still on, and propped the shutters up again from inside. With this, it won’t look like it’s been removed with a quick glance from the outside.

The interior of the room was surprisingly wide—although, that was because the first floor was a tatami-matted space with almost all the fusuma’s thrown wide open. Similar to my parents’ home, the layout was partitioned by fusuma’s and shoji where deemed necessary.

A sour odor drifted through the room, was it because trash had been left somewhere? After taking several steps, I remembered and took the pocket light out of my pocket. I pointed it at my feet and switched it on. There lay several magazines and clothes strewn about. A fusuma that was broken had been removed and propped up against the wall, and an old electric fan lay tumbled over in the corner of the wall. For some reason, I aimed my light here and there and got startled.

Countless talismans were plastered over the lintels. Some were already peeling off and some were torn.

“W...what is this?”

(They’re talismans.)

“No, I understand that. I’m asking why there are so many of them hung up like that.”

(The residents must have been afraid.)

After the young girl’s voice whispered in an echo—she continued, ‘However’.

“…However?”

But she didn't continue, and my surroundings continued to be filled with silence.

“…Hey? However what?”

But there was still no reply. I thought she might have ended up going somewhere, but when I stayed still and looked around, I realized her presence was a little further ahead of me. For some reason, it felt like she was biting her nails, but eventually, her presence turned to move in the direction of the kitchen.

(…This house is interesting.)

As if lured by that somewhat joyous voice, I stepped over the scattered luggage and nervously stepped into the kitchen.

(Why was so much luggage left behind?)

“Eh?”

(Dirty dishes.) (Worn out toothbrushes.) (Discolored vegetables.)

It seemed the invisible young girl was speaking of things she saw in the kitchen sink one-by-one.

(Toy trains.)

…Toys?

I, too, drew close to the sink, and peered inside.

Sure enough, there were several pieces of rubbish strewn about, and a wooden toy train was lying amongst them.

(Torn magazine pages.) (A torn shoelace.) (A doll's arm.) (A piece of paper.) (A jar of salt.) (Dead insects.) (Sand.) (Rubber bands.) (Scraps of packaging.) (Citrus peels.) (Cup noodle packaging.) (One sock.) (Bookmarks.) (A discolored photograph.) (A ball with no air.)

"A trash house… well I wouldn't go so far as to call it that, but it's definitely close to one."

When I said that,

(A hoarder.) The voice spoke.

(One of the anxiety disorders—people who can't throw away things or put things away -- the root cause being trauma of having been abandoned by someone in the past.)

"Are you saying the resident of this house was that kind of person?"

When I mentioned this, I remembered. In the first place, wasn't this house noticed as a place where six spiritual paths overlapped?

When I asked about it, a voice echoed in the darkness.

(Spiritual paths are just paths. They exist everywhere. In a country with so many temples and shrines, it's impossible to avoid living in places where they connect and intersect.)

"Then, just why on earth is this house--"

As I was speaking, I noticed it. It was, how should I say…

…A strange smell of blood.

I puckered up my face and sniffed unintentionally, when—

(Don't turn around.)

The invisible girl's words made my body freeze with a jerk. For some reason, I felt a cold chill at my back. I held my breath, and slowly turned my gaze from the sink to behind me.

…….Eh?

Directly behind my sneakers – was someone's feet.

(Stop breathing.)

…B, breathing? Why?

That's what I thought, but I was already in a state where I couldn't breathe anymore. I had no idea what was going on. In the darkness, someone's skinny bare feet were stuck close to me.

…H…hey, wasn't no one supposed to be in this house…?

My body was as rigid as a rock, my gaze unable to move from the bare feet that were right behind me. The skin of the feet was discolored blue. There were no fingernails, and they were sore in places, and, for some reason—Ah, why was it?

They were both right feet.

The moment I realized that, I let out a shriek, "Eek!". At the same time, my stiff body loosened. I turned around as I stumbled forward, and aimed my light at my back, but there were no feet there anymore, there was no one.

In the silence, only the sound of my breathing echoed. As I desperately took the oxygen in me, I aimed my light here and there with trembling hands. The shadows of different types of trash stretched out creepily, but nowhere amongst them was anyone barefoot with two right feet.

"….H, hey, what… was that just now?"

At long last, I was able to speak. Before I'd realized, the bloody smell had vanished.

"…You saw it, didn't you? What… was that thing just now?"

(…Who knows?)

The invisible girl close to me spoke once more.

(But, there are still two more.)

“…T-t-two more, you say?”

(Above.)

With that voice, I nervously aimed my light at the staircase at the end of the kitchen.

There, illuminated by the light, an old wooden staircase extended upwards into an even deeper darkness.

“…H, hey, let’s stop now.”

I spoke in a trembling voice, however, without hesitation, the presence headed in that direction.

A creaking sound reverberated, suggesting that the invisible girl had placed her feet on the stairs.

(It’s on the second floor.)

“…Second floor? What is?”

But the girl did not answer, only the creaking sound of the staircase echoed upwards. At that moment, I heard a sharp *clink* echo from somewhere inside the house once more. In an instant, something inside me shouted, ‘Stop right now’. Nevertheless, my feet slowly proceeded towards the darkness.

As I slowly ascended the steps firmly one-by-one, I remembered. Come to think of it, when I was in the courtyard a while back, it felt like something was peeping out of the shoji on the second-floor window. What on earth was that….? And was it somewhere upstairs on the second floor?

As I moved my trembling legs one after the other, I reached the top of the stairs, and aimed my light.

The air was heavy. And -- it was overwhelmingly dark. It was dark enough to swallow my light whole.

I took one gulp, still desperately trying to regain my breath, and first checked my surroundings.

Roughly speaking, the second floor seemed to have three rooms. However, like the first floor, each of the three rooms was not independent, but merely separated by fusuma. However, the fusuma was torn at various places. In the darkness, something beyond the darkness of the torn fusuma—

Suddenly, the ground shook.

No, my legs had begun to tremble.

Beyond the fusuma—that's right, I was afraid of the secret of my childhood, locked away inside the darkness.

"…If I could just, open it."

Before I'd realized, I was muttering out loud between the gap of my teeth as if I was grumbling.

"….I might be broken… But, if I can open that, I'll be cured… That's right, by doing that… I returned to being normal… so once more… it'll be fine if I open it again… I'll open it…"

Encouraging my legs that were on the verge of collapse, I drew close to the fusuma, step-by-step.

I placed my trembling fingertips on the fusuma, and with my eyes closed… opened it in a single breath. Then, a burning smell spread around me. I slowly opened my eyes a tiny bit, and aimed my light---

Ahead of me, was just a tatami matted room about 10 sqm in size.

"…S, see, look."

I breathed a sigh of relief, and at the same time, I once again noticed that something still smelled.

It wasn't just that the stagnant air had not been ventilated for a long time. The air itself was ridiculously heavy.

And, I realized that the tatami was billowing.

As if drawn to that, I aimed my light down towards the floor. I strained my eyes and gasped.

It was hair. Long jet-black hair creeped along the tatami.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing right now. It wasn't hair that had been cut off. It was as if it had grown out of somewhere, filling the room with darkness, and a bloody smell.

From somewhere, a *clink* sounded.

No, it was as if it had been echoing continuously for a while now.

It was as if I had only been hearing that sound at the edge of my consciousness, and paid no attention to it.

If people lived in a world their minds believed in—

Then what would happen to people, when their minds no longer believed? If the things they saw, and the things they heard—if they became unbelievable all at once…what would people use to stay standing?

As I was petrified in place—

I traced along the direction of that hair with my pocket light in a daze. And when I recognized a Buddhist family chapel in one corner of the wall, I heard my heart violently thumping. I averted my eyes instantly – but at long last, I finally recognized the thing I saw the moment I opened the fusuma.

Something was there.

It seemed to be a woman.

It felt as if her feet from her ankles down were bluish-white, and she had no toenails.

Her hair hung down and covered the entire floor, she stood still facing the wall, her back was turned towards me, and—

“-A…Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!”

I screamed. I screamed as loud as I could. By screaming, I was trying to stimulate my ears, my senses, to bring back reality. I wanted to deny the entirety of the thing in front of my eyes as an illusion.

And the next thing I knew, I ran off and almost rolled over.

I kicked various things away that were scattered on the floor, bumped my shoulder into something, but ran despite that as I tumbled down the stairs. I descended to the ground floor and closed my eyes as if pretending not to perceive the marked presences, and dashed towards the sliding storm shutter. With a violent crash, the sliding storm shutter fell outwards, and I simultaneously collapsed out on the veranda. I had already hit my body here and there, but it was trivial. Even if I had dropped an arm or two on the spot, I would have left it there. I was shouting something, but I didn’t care about being reported anymore. Or rather, I was scared to the point where it would have been better for my screams to be reported and an officer to come.

The woman with her back turned who I saw just now, was horrifying, the metallic sound that seemed to be chasing me was horrifying, and the thing most horrifying of all, was the me just now who had been exploring the ruins of a building until now together with an invisible, unidentified ‘voice’. Once again, I heard a *clink* ring out from somewhere, but I didn’t look back anymore, instead, I ran out of the grounds of the house as if trampling over the fence.

I ran out to the street and kept running and running all the way to Itsukaichikaidō where many cars were passing by.

○

What happened?

No—what was happening?

My heartbeat slowly returned to normal together with my ability to think.

Right now, I was sitting alone on a bench set up on the sidewalk along Itsukaichikaidō, with my hands clutching my hair.

Despite it being late at night, there were countless bikes and cars passing by on the road. There were students walking along the pavement laughing with each other. It was peaceful to the point where someone like me, trembling by myself over a ghost, looked comical. However, I was still worried about whether my head was functioning properly.

Slowly and gradually, I recalled the events that took place in that house.

I heard the whisper of an invisible young girl behind the hanging lantern in the courtyard. As if lured by her whispers, I entered that house.

The 'Overlapping house' – a metallic sound echoed there, a house where six spiritual paths overlapped. Countless pieces of junk had been gathered up inside, and who knows how many old talismans were plastered on the walls. There, I saw a strange pair of feet…or so I thought. On the second floor, it felt as if I saw a woman with her drooping hair covering the entire floor. Was I normal at that time? Was I not broken once again? Was it all a delusion, borne from being distraught with fear? Even the repeated metallic sound must have been an auditory hallucination, or the rattling of the house. That's right, didn't Krishna-san always tell me? That ninety-nine percent of ghost stories out there in the world are lies, delusions, or misunderstandings.

Thereupon, I recalled the words of the girl whose voice I could only hear.

It was when I was looking at the junk in the sink on the first floor, and looked back at the thing with the two right feet behind me.

The young girl said: 『There are still two more.』 That's right, there was something on the second floor. It felt like it was a woman. But 'two more'…. Wasn't that the end of it?

However, I recalled back that far, when a cold, chilling thought came down to me.

No—that wasn't it….

The last person she meant… could it have been…

(Why did you climb up to the second floor?)

The moment that voice reached my ears once more, I jumped up.

"….Guwaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

I screamed shamelessly, managing to hold myself back from falling off the bench, and looked to my side to see—

That the presence of the girl from that time was markedly present next to me.

I was slowly brought to tears, and with my mouth half open,

(Say, why did you go to the second floor by yourself?)

I heard her voice once more, and clasped both of my hands together and raised them up in prayer.

"I…I'm begging you, please go to heaven… It won't do you any good to haunt me. Not at all."

In response, a small gasp of exasperation escaped from next to me.

(I'll only ask once more. Why did you go to the second floor?)

“W…why you ask…? You…said…above…that it was on the second floor.”

I continued to speak.

“I know already. You’re the third one, aren’t you? What are you trying to do by possessing me? If you’re gonna possess and kill me, then hurry up and do it. This slow way of doing it… have some mercy.”

In reply, the voice declared something unimaginable.

(I never said above, nor did I say that there was anything on the second floor.)

….Eh?

Thereupon, I realized with a shudder. Didn’t she just ask, 『Why did you go to the second floor alone?』

So that meant---Eh…?

(I was on the first floor. I was thinking about the association between the countless presences, the metallic sound that continued to ring out, and the direction of the affixed talismans. And then I understood. Those diverse items in the sink weren’t things that couldn’t be thrown away.)

“….What…?”

(It was the opposite – they were things that had been gathered to comfort a child.)

Those words—made goosebumps run all over my body for some reason.

A child…Yes, a child.

The online posts I read in my room also said that there was a child in that house.

And that you shouldn't look at that child…

(That was the third—no, the most malicious ghost of that house.)

…..

(Did you catch sight of a child anywhere?)

In that instant—I remembered.

When I was crouching in the doorway of that house, I recalled a mother and child passing by me with their hands clasped together.

At that time, I felt something strange. That's right, why were a mother and child walking together in the middle of the night?

"You can't possibly mean…"

(You saw it, didn't you?)

"No, I don't know if that was it…but, I saw a mother and child in front of that house."

(That's where the entrance is.)

"…"

After gulping down once, I asked:

"Just now, you said that you understood, but—just what is it that you understood about that house?"

(I believe it's true that it is a house of overlapping spiritual paths. Because it is said that when the spirits pass through the walls, a sharp metallic sound rings out.)

"…..Ah."

(But that's not all. The people who lived there were struck by all kinds of inexplicable phenomena, going so far as to post talismans.

However, you must post the talismans in a specific direction. In that house, all the talismans were all posted on the north side. That would make it impossible for the spirits to exit. Inevitably, they would accumulate in that house. You often see bait sold that's used to lure cockroaches and keep them in place -- but this house was constructed similarly.)

"…Then, what was the deal with that child?"

(I don't know.)

The girl spoke.

(They say there are times when ghosts merge with each other—but that was different. It was something originally not human, something that took the appearance of a child and existed there.)

"….."

(In addition to being a house of overlapping spiritual paths, there was intense traffic of ghosts—Fearing that, the talismans were posted, but in the wrong way—the spirts accumulated —they continued to accumulate, continued to overlap, mere painful thoughts that continued to accumulate and thicken—that crystallization.)

'However', said the girl with a trace of happiness in her voice.

(It's wonderful that such incomprehensible things still exist in this world.)

I was left dumbfounded by the innocent tone of her voice, when—

It felt as if the girl stood up without making a sound.

"H…hey."

In a panic, I called out to her, but the girl's presence gradually moved away.

"Hey, wait a minute. Just who the hell--"

Who are you?

The moment I was about to ask that, it felt… as if the girl stopped a little further ahead of me.

(I forgot to mention it, but you are not broken.)

Her voice was somewhat kind as it reached my ears, echoing in the silence of the night.

(Because – you can still ‘fear’.)

Case 14: In the Mirror

Since the accident – I had forgotten something.

That memory slipped in and out of view at the back of my head. It was as if it had been crudely overwritten with a pen, rather than having been wiped clean by an eraser.

I believe it was a ‘person’.

I knew that person in the past. And I’m sure I met them in the hospital room.

They came to inquire about my health with flowers… but I screamed when I saw them, and lost consciousness.

Just what the hell had made me so afraid?

What was it about them that scared me to the point that I lost consciousness?

And why – did someone cross a line on my memories? And when?

That’s right… that was the starting point. Back then, who else was in the hospital room besides me? My sister flew in from Fujieda a little later…. To begin with, who was in the room when I first regained consciousness?

Krishna-san, and—

And the moment I recalled the foxlike grin on his face, everything seemed to click together.

….It was Sako.

Didn’t that rotten priest do something strange to me again?

I finally realized this in the university courtyard at the start of the new school semester--

And I immediately skipped my first period class of 'Macroeconomics' on the opening day. I ran out of there and hurried to the western club building.

My body was now physically fit. A scar remained on my right elbow, where the stitches and surrounding flesh had discolored, but it didn't really hurt anymore.

I cut through the courtyard, passed through the gate of the western club building, jumped into the entrance by pushing my way through the packed bicycles, and ran up the stairs. I was headed to the third floor, to the liberal arts clubroom that was ostensibly known as the 'Beatnik Research Society'.

And—

When I came up to the third floor, I quickly caught sight of that petite figure.

The head of the Beatnik Research Society, Shiina Kurimoto-san had closed the door to the clubroom and was about to lock it.

"Krishna-san!"

"….Hm?"

"Krishna-san! T, there's something I want to ask!"

I rushed to her side, out of breath. Krishna-san was dressed in a spring-like outfit: a striped cut-and-sewn navy-blue spring coat, and she looked up at me about three heads below me with a puzzled expression on her face.

"What is it, Nagi-kun? What's the hurry? I was just about to go somewhere."

The baby face peeking behind those drooping red glasses, was as cute

as always. I immediately felt relaxed and asked.

“Going somewhere? Don’t you have a lecture?”

Of course, you could say that question had the slightly ulterior motive of asking if I could go with her.

“Where are you going? You can’t possibly be going to investigate some haunted place?”

I unintentionally cracked that kind of joke, causing her to glare back at me instantly.

“’Ikaigabuchi’ has been disbanded. No more investigations, ever.”

“R…right.”

“The taxi will be here in a few minutes. If you have a question, then hurry up and ask.”

--A few minutes.

I wondered if I could explain such a vague and complicated story in just a few minutes.

I was in the middle of trying to arrange the information required to the bare minimum and arrange my tense feelings into logic, worrying about whether to tell her about the strange voice of the young girl I had heard in the abandoned house recently, but, that would be disobeying her order, even though she was drunk and sleepy back when she suddenly stood up and rebuked the tough guys of ‘Ikaigabuchi’ to stop—and as my thoughts swirled and swirled over such things,

“Oh, that’s right.”

I heard a clear voice.

“Would you like to come?”

“…Eh?”

“It’s a little far though. Let’s talk in the taxi on the way.”

○

“There lives ‘An old man who became unable leave his mansion’ in the place we’re headed to now.”

Right around the time the taxi exited Itsukaichikaidō into Oumekaidō, Krishna-san said that.

“Became unable? Why? Is he really fat?”

“…That’s not it. It seems the old man saw something in the village he lived in long ago. The story is related to that.”

Things had suddenly taken on an occult air, so I straightened my posture. I was, of course, very welcome to it.

“The old man’s name is Ryouichi Mamiya. He is the chairman of ‘Mamiya Motors’, a company listed on the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange with a sixty percent share of the domestic market. He built a fortune in his lifetime, and now, he doesn’t have long to live. He built a mansion in the suburbs and has kept himself confined inside for many years. There are people who take care of him, but he never goes outside the mansion.”

“Eh, wait a minute. He doesn’t go outside? By choice?”

“I’ll explain that in detail from now on, but in short, the people surrounding him think that it’s his choice, but the old man can’t leave even if he wanted to.”

“…….”

“And the person in question is half prepared to live out his life in that mansion. It seems he's already had a will prepared-- which was also controversial. 『After I die, half of my fortune will be donated to the

syndicate, and the remaining half will be equally divided among my relatives. However -- if there is a person who takes me out of the mansion while I am still alive, my entire fortune will be handed over to them.』 ”

“Eh…?”

“That's right. From the relatives’ point of view, that is intolerable. If they wait until he died, they would receive a portion of the half, but if someone were to take the old man out of the mansion, their inheritance would become zero. Since that day, the relatives began to visit the old man. Everyone would invite him to a beautiful summer retreat, or they would invite him to come and see expensive art pieces they went to the trouble of borrowing from abroad. Among them was a fool who pretended to have caught a giraffe by having a deer go through orthopedic surgery, and got sued by animal rights activists.”

“…Hah.”

“Well, it's understandable, because when real estate and bonds are included, his total assets are said to easily exceed 700 billion.”

“So, why are you headed over there, Krishna-san?”

“Well, you see Mamiya-san has always endorsed the goal behind ‘Ikaigabuchi’. He kept donating money to me all these years. I was also asked by his family if ‘I could do something’ – so I thought I might be useful somehow.”

“Does that mean you'll bring that old man outside?”

“No, I'm just going to talk to him. Returning to the main point, it seems the reason the old man said something like that was because it stemmed from something he saw in the village a long time ago. The client said that if that were to be settled, then he would cancel that strange will, -- but well, I wonder if that's really true. At any rate, I thought it was the least I could do for everything he’s done for me.”

“I see.”

There are people in the world who are troubled by bizarre things --

but on the other hand, one doubt remained in my head.

“But, why did you bring me along?””

“…Eh?”

“I mean, you're always saying that I'm not allowed, that I'm absolutely not allowed to involve myself with the occult! You stop me a bit unreasonably, so I just thought it was strange.”

Krishna-san muttered slightly in response, “That’s true”, and then hung her head down, trying to arrange all her thoughts in that small brow of hers.

“Right… I’ve always stopped you from involving yourself with the occult.”

“Yes.”

“I thought it wasn’t good for you to be in contact with the people who were close to the occult…but actually, I’ve been in two minds about that recently.”

“In two minds? About what?

“No matter how much I tried to stop you, you would always end up barging into the occult. For a long time, I thought that was because of your simple and foolish nature, and I thought you were wrong, but —could it be your only…”

“My only?”

“…No, nothing.”

Thereupon, Krishna-san held her tongue and looked at the flowing scenery outside, “I still haven't figured it out.”

I, too, became lost in my thoughts. Come to think of it, how many times have we had the same conversation? A paranormal event occurs. I get excited. Krishna-san stops me. However, in the end, my curiosity wins out, and I barge into dangerous territory, and end up in tears-- It felt like that kind of thing had repeated all year long.

Wait—huh?

Thereupon I felt like a piece was missing.

The thing that had been crossed in my mind, appeared vaguely once more.

“Recently—I’ve been seeing a lot of articles on racial conflicts on international news websites.”

Suddenly, Krishna-san spoke of something I didn’t understand at all.

“Racial conflicts?”

“There are countless races living in this world, all with their own values, religions and cultures. The Middle East conflict, Cyprus, Kurds, Somalia, Chechnya, Afghanistan – Looking around Asia, it’s full of problems. And the end result is a cycle of abuse, leading to conflict. People instinctually fear those who are different from themselves. There are still only a few people who can accept different races and cultures universally. It is human nature to fear and defend oneself -- but when they go too far, they might lead to intimidation of others.”

“…”

“Say, Nagi-kun. Why do you think wars happen?”

Thereupon, Krishna-san looked in my direction.

“Do they happen for territory? Are they economic activities resulting from the complexly intertwined interests of major powers? No, isn’t the real reason they happen, and the impetus behind them, a needless fear? And, in turn, didn’t that come from the abuse against those with different values. No matter how much we may think we are enlightened, we are still subjective creatures. Conversely, without subjectivity, it would be difficult to sustain life, and it is only with the assurance of escaping to a safe zone that we can be considerate of others. Words like maturity or moral standards only come about when people have enough food and clothing. When natural disasters that turn heaven and earth upside down occur, or when the myth of safety is shattered, how many people must have hurt others without

any grounds simply on their emotions? Isn't the history of human conflict a history of abuse towards others?”

Having spoken that far in a single breath, Krishna-san took a short break, and hung her head down once more as if embarrassed of herself for raising her voice.

“That’s why-- when people start abusing others on a global scale, I always get anxious. It’s as if something terrible has quietly started somewhere... I end up feeling that the world is headed in an awful direction.”

“Um... How is that related to what we’re talking about here?

I asked, ‘Ah’, Krishna-san strangely got flustered and blushed.

“... I think I've reached a dead end in the way I do things.”

“…Eh?”

“I've been trying to keep you safe, to stop you from involving yourself in the occult this far… but that might have actually been the wrong thing to do. I think I ended up bringing you along because I’ve begun to doubt myself about that recently.”

○

“Don’t you think that human society is slowly rotting away?”

The old man with the gleaming face of a wax doll asked gleefully.

Krishna-san and I looked at each other, and he continued.

“Awful things – truly awful things have started happening in every corner of the world. Don't you think that the balance that had been miraculously maintained until now has begun to decline far beyond

the intelligence of the average human being? No, well, anyone with a modicum of knowledge could have seen this coming, but at long last, our foolish leaders have finally begun to realize and begun to panic."

Right now, we were in an area of villas deep in Okutama.

It was the home of the aforementioned 'Old man who became unable leave his mansion'. And the person before us was the old man in question.

Even though it was spring, it was still cold here. The cold air seeped in through the windows, as if the vestiges of winter had missed their chance to return and hung lazily over the house. Perhaps that was the reason why the fireplace of the living room of about 33 square meters in size still had a fire lit in it.

The old man who was sitting deep in a rocking chair in front of it was watching me and Krishna-san, who were sitting on the leather sofa, with great interest.

"Communication is important in order to get along well with others, but to achieve smooth communication, the same level of intellect is required. In short, it means that the smarter person has to match the stupid one in order for the conversation to take place. However, do you think that countries with high moral standards can conduct diplomacy with uncivilized nations on equal terms? Do you think there is a future of the world like that where the wise can get along with the fools? That will only give birth to stagnation. There is no progress in that. It's impossible in the world of wild animals, where the weak are inevitably abandoned. Ethics, morality, morals—in the world of today, we say wonderful things, like 'Let's protect the weak', or 'Let's create a world that's good for the weak'. However, morals that go too far will threaten to turn the weak into the strong. Everyone pulls the legs of the exceedingly superior individual and drags them down to the ground and beats him with a stick. Isn't that the rotten state the world finds itself in today?"

I was listening quietly—

I thought this might have been the ‘abuse’ Krishna-san spoke of.

“—Now then, it’s been a long time, Kurimoto-kun.”

--*Cough*, the old man’s wrinkled face contorted. Apparently, he laughed.

“It has been a long time since my last visit.”

Krishna-san too bowed her bobbed head down.

“I visited you in your home in Tokyo many times, but I wasn’t aware that you had moved here, my apologies.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure the people in the house must have been troubled about how to explain it. Ah…I heard that you closed down ‘Ikaigabuchi’.”

“Yes, I went too far and forgot my place.”

“…Is that so? I thought you had the right goal, and I don’t think there was anyone better qualified to do what you set out to do.”

“No…it’s truly shameful to abandon my goal with your contribution over many years—but I thought it was impossible for me to go any further.”

“…Hmm.”

The old man stopped moving like a broken doll, and then added, “Well, please relax and take your time.”

“No, actually, I can’t relax that much.”

Thereupon, she stopped speaking, and spoke again after having made up her mind.

“To tell you the truth, there's another reason I've come here today besides the matter of Ikaigabuchi’s closure. I've been asked by your family to get you out of this house.”

“I see.”

The old man looked at Krishna-san in amusement and gave a large nod.

“That’s why I gave that talk at the beginning.”

“…Eh?”

“The story where the weak being discarded in the world was ideal. In short, I, who am old, and sick, is to put it in clear terms, a weak creature, and it is right that I should be abandoned. I believe that it comes from animals originally. In the past, there used to be stories about mountains where old people were abandoned. Among wild animals, there are those with the nature of hiding themselves when they feel their death is near. I am merely imitating that; it seems my will to be left alone was not recognized.”

…This guy.

For the first time, I realized that this old man, who was like a withered tree, was not an ordinary old man. Ryouichi Mamiya had realized the reason we were here since the start – that’s why, he started off with that bewildering story.

“However.”

Krishna-san straightened her posture and spoke.

“From the conversation we’ve had up until now, I can say that you have intelligence, and judgement. I believe that long as a person is human and has intelligence and reason, they are human. And I believe people as people have a guarantee to a dignified life.”

“This is dignified. Staying shut in here, and dying quietly alone is the only thing dignified left for me.”

“By abandoning your family? Is it dignified to throw away everything in your life up until now and shut yourself in here? If that's the case, then at the risk of sounding quite presumptuous, I believe you should clearly make out your inheritance. It might be harsh to say-- but if you were to do that, then no one would complain about your actions. It seems to me that your strange will has on the contrary, created a lot of commotion around you.”

“…”

In response, the old man narrowed the countless wrinkles around his eyes, and gazed at Krishna-san.

“How much have you heard?”

“How much, you ask?”

“About my story.”

“I'll be honest with you.”

Krishna-san spoke as if accepting the old man's gaze.

“I heard that one day, you became afraid of mirrors. That's why you made this mansion with no mirrors anywhere and shut yourself in here. And soon after that you made that will -- and, that it all started with something you saw in a cave in a village long ago. I haven't heard anything besides that.”

“Do you want to hear the rest of it?”

“…”

“Will you learn the rest of it-- and solve the mystery that has plagued me for so many years?”

“I can't guarantee that I will solve it but, I'll help you as much as I can.”

“That's fine.”

The old man contorted his wrinkled face once more, sat back deeper in his chair, and slowly closed his eyes. The room fell into silence for a while after that. Birds were chirping outside the window, and the occasional crackling of firewood was all that could be heard.

“The thing…that I saw… in the darkness of the cave back then, were eyes.”

…Eh?

“They were beautiful eyes. They appeared in the darkness.”

“Sometimes the truly terrifying things are beautiful to the point where they feel out of this world.”

○

“It happened shortly after the war, in a certain village, was a certain man.”

The old man began to narrate in pieces, Krishna-san and I became absorbed and bent ourselves forward before we’d realized.

“The man had a good friend. A childhood friend who would accompany him whenever he went hunting or to the fields. But one day, they ended up deep in the forest in pursuit of a beast, and arrived at a certain cave. They had been told that a beast of unknown origin dwelled inside since long ago, and that they should not go near it. It was said to be powerful, fast, and had a strong stink. Some said it had red eyes. That it had learned human speech, and was said to have devoured humans at times.”

A gulp rang in my throat.

“They were both still young, burning with ambition. Furthermore, they were both rivals in love over a young girl in the village, so they entered inside as if vying for the achievement. The entrance of the cave was dark and cramped. The two had a flame alight as they ventured ahead with hunting rifles in hand. They slowly made their way through a long, long, cold space of rock and earth. Eventually, they saw something white beyond the light. It was a shimenawa. A thick and ancient shimenawa rope that blocked their progress. Next to it stood a sign that read: 『Those who continue ahead from here will have no guarantee of their life』. They looked at each other and hesitated for a moment. But in the end, they cut through the shimenawa with the nata[3] they had. It was a cliché at the entrance

of forbidden places, but more than anything, the excitement that prey was near won out above all else. In those days, everyone was always hungry, and animals with protein were exceedingly valuable. They must have imagined the joy of the people of the village, and consequently, the joyous face of the girl they both favored. However, as they ventured further, they soon encountered a second shimenawa blocking the path. There was indeed another sign on a post that read: 『Those who continue ahead from here will have no guarantee of their friend.』”

“—Friend?”

Thereupon, Krishna-san interjected. The old man nodded in a relaxed manner.

“That's right, friend. The two looked at each other. And then nodded to one another. The two had fought and scuffled countless times since childhood, and had a strange mutual trust in each other. An overconfident trust in the other, thinking that this guy wouldn't be done in so easily. On those grounds, they cut the shimenawa once more. They continued further ahead, and eventually, beyond the darkness, they smelled a bloody smell together with the faint sense of something breathing. The man thought that it was the prey they had come chasing. Just when he thought he was almost there, the final shimenawa appeared. What was written on there was, 『Those who continue ahead from here will have no guarantee of their name.』”

“…Name?”

This time, I was the one who unintentionally ended up repeating it. In response, the old man creased the tree-like wrinkles around the edges of his mouth.

“Having already been threatened with their lives and their friend, would something like ‘name’ threaten them at this stage? The two enthusiastically cut through the shimenawa. Thinking about it now, the two being there together was the sin. If it had only been one of them, they might have returned to the village at the first shimenawa. No, they might have returned right from the entrance of the cave. The two continued further, relying indeed on their mutual trust and stubbornness.”

“……”

“The darkness -- thickened.”

The old man's voice seemed low, and even hoarser.

“No matter where he aimed the light from his torch, it was a strange darkness that seemed to coil around him, making him unable to see what lay ahead. Eventually the man realized that the earth was slanting down. Could this be the slope that led to the land of the dead? Wasn’t the land of the dead further ahead of here? Before he realized, the man's knees were shaking. He asked himself over and over if he could still go back. However, at that moment, someone's voice reached his ears. The man looked at his friend, who was supposed to be walking next to him. He couldn't see him clearly in the darkness, but he didn't seem to be talking to him or looking at him. The man wondered if he was imagining things, but as he continued, someone’s whispers did indeed reach his ears. The man tried to listen carefully to the voice. The voice spoke: 『You two have entered a place that you were not supposed to enter. You disregarded three warnings and stepped in. Therefore, I will take your life, your friend, and your name.』 It was the next moment that the man almost shouted out involuntarily. He saw eyes in the darkness. Clear, beautiful eyes were floating in the air. The man was drawn to those eyes – when suddenly, something violently covered him from behind. He ended up dropping the torch to the ground, and screamed out loud. A foul stench filled his surroundings. He did not know if it was the beast they had chased, or an ancient mountain god rumored from long ago-- But driven by terror, the man recklessly thrust the nata in his hand at the foul stench in the darkness.…”

Thereupon the old man stopped speaking, and in exchange the sound of my throat gulping rang out. Eventually Krishna-san asked him.

“So, what happened then?”

“…I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

“The smell of the beast, the smell of blood--when the man came to,

he was collapsed at the entrance of the cave. The dried blood of something stuck to his face, his clothes, and the hunting rifle and nata he should have held were nowhere to be found. In their stead-- he was holding someone else's arm that was already drained of blood. A left arm."

…Eek.

As I was flinching, I heard Krishna-san's small throat gulp.

"I don't know who that arm belonged to. The man seemed to have come to his senses a few days after he left that cave. The arm was already in the process of decomposing, and in the end, his friend never returned. The man, who had broken out in a high fever, was somehow rescued by the villagers who had come to search for him, and he was exercised at the village temple. A funeral was held for the friend and the arm, whose owner was unknown, was buried. Time passed by, and with the death of his friend who was his rival in love, the man married the girl in due course. He took over the family and worked hard to forget the nightmare of that day. He survived the chaos of the post-war years, and before he realized, he had grown old, and amassed a considerable fortune -- until one day, he began to dream. Something was moving beyond the darkness that extended in all directions. Something without one arm shakes its head, searching for something. And when it notices the man's presence, it comes toward him with great speed."

"…"

"Was that his friend…or the thing that spoke to him in the back of the cave …. The man would always wake up drenched in sweat… and, only one sentence would always remain echoing in his ear."

"In the mirror."

"…Mirror."

--Was that where the mirror came in?

“Yes, that’s why the man became afraid to look in the mirror. He had not seen his own reflection for decades. He even became afraid of seeing his own reflection in the window and such. At any rate, he built a mansion without mirrors and shut himself inside.”

I unconsciously looked around the room. I indeed saw no sign of anything that resembled a mirror in this room, or in any of the corridors I passed through when I came here. Looking carefully, I understood, but, the windows were also tightly bound with lace curtains so that they couldn’t be opened.

“Now then Kurimoto-kun, what do you think? Did you figure out what the thing inside the mirror is?”

“—No.”

Krishna-san bit her lip.

“Unfortunately, I still haven't.”

“…As expected. Well, it’s fine. To begin with, I would be troubled if I were to be given the answer so simply.”

The old man smiled again like a wrinkled tree.

“There are many guest rooms in this mansion. Please take your time.”

After saying that, he quietly closed his eyes as if drifting to sleep.

○

As the servant prompted us out, and we entered the corridor, I was struck by the sensation that time had suddenly begun to move.

I was relieved to find that I was in Okutama, a world where time functioned properly, and that there was air here. I guess that’s how much I had been drawn into the strange story of the old man, Ryouichi Mamiya.

As I walked down the corridor, stepping firmly on the dark red carpet, Krishna-san stopped suddenly ahead of me. I looked to see that she had her face up to the wall of the corridor. I went up next to her, and saw several framed black-and-white photographs adorned alongside it.

“I guess it must be Mamiya-san and his friend who passed away.”

Krishna-san spoke.

Two men stood side-by-side as they smiled in the monochrome picture. They were both young and had nice smiles.

One of them was indeed the old man. I thought he must have been quite handsome when he was young, but-- this was amazing. I never thought I'd go so far as to say that a man was smoking hot, but I'll say it now. A bright young man who reminded me of a movie actor was smiling and showing his white teeth. And the other man projected in the photograph must have been the friend who disappeared in the cave. Compared to Mamiya-san, He didn't look as graceful, but he still had a beaming smile aimed towards us. And, seeing his left arm still attached to his body, something bitter rose up in me.

“What do you think?”

After being introduced to our respective guest rooms on the second floor, and as soon as the servant departed, I went to Krishna-san’s room and asked her.

The bobbed hair occult website manager was sitting in her bed with her fist to her lips, ‘Hmmm’.

“It feels like Mamiya-san’s sense of guilt of ‘Having abandoned his friend and coming this far’ has taken form. I think the guilt is too heavy for him to accept his current success as a reward for which he worked so hard to redeem himself. On the contrary, the more wealth he accumulated, the stronger it might have become.”

“... Ah, I see.”

“A cave that was deemed forbidden. The prey that took refuge within. The era where food was scarce, I don't think that is something

to be persistently blamed for. However, what I don't understand is the voice he heard, the thing that assaulted him from the depths of the darkness. The possibility is high that it was an auditory hallucination, or a delusion borne from fear -- but, in the chance that it was neither of those, then I should have searched for the meaning behind it."

"Should have…? Eh, do you mean to say that you already went to investigate that cave?"

"Yeah."

Krishna-san simply nodded.

"It was about a week ago. I went to the cave in question. The entrance was still cordoned off with a new shimenawa, a small shrine had been erected, and it was sealed off so that no one could enter. I heard from the shrine that managed the small shrine that it had completely caved in only a few meters in its depths. According to the chief priest, a deity of unknown origin had originally been enshrined in the cave. There were also theories that it was dedicated to a fleeing samurai in the closing years of the Heian period or to a mountain god, but in the end the origin wasn't well understood. Even in the village, it is buried in the dark of history as something that was already over. I felt I was being indirectly pressured not to dig in too deeply into it."

"Huh."

All I could do was stroke my chin, and nod.

"But... This house, it's amazing, isn't it? Is he living alone in a place that's big enough for a family of ten? Was the Mamiya family rich to begin with?"

"He seemed to have been an influential person of the village, but even so, he must have been wealthy for a villager's standard. That person built his fortune through hard work up until now. That earnest effort must have originated from the feeling of atonement towards his friend -- but perhaps it was also a kind of possession or curse."

I nodded once more, ‘I see’ -- And asked.

“Then, what are you going to do, Krishna-san?”

“Hm?”

“When are we going back? It's already evening, even if we were to call a taxi….”

“…Ah. I think I'd like to stay for a few days here if I'm allowed to.”

“Eh?”

“It's fine if you go back. No, you should go back. Your lectures will have started already.”

“…No, well, that is the case, but what are you planning on doing by staying here for a few days?”

“I believe this is also a form of exorcism. I want to do something as thanks for all the years I've been supported for ‘Ikaigabuchi’.”

Krishna-san spoke as she bit her lips—

However, could she really do that? No, it might be possible that she could loosen the hardened guilty conscience of the old man by listening to his stories…but, could she really do that by staying here for only a few days.

I looked outside the window for some reason. The sun had already begun to set, and it was getting darker by the minute. There were hardly any houses or even power lines along the way, so the surroundings would completely sink into darkness.

Ugh… what should I do? Well, I could do something about university, but I still had my part-time job, and I didn’t even bring any spare clothes to begin with. There didn’t seem to be any convenience stores nearby, and in the first place, just how was I going to go back home alone from here by myself?

As I thought that,

“…Ah.”

A voice suddenly escaped Krishna-san.

“Why didn’t I realize it before—the warnings in the cave Mamiya-san saw.”

“Eh?”

“Listen, first it was 『Those who continue ahead from here will have no guarantee of their ‘life’』. Next was 『Those who continue ahead from here will have no guarantee of their ‘friend’』. And at the end it was 『Those who continue ahead from here will have no guarantee of their ‘name’』. If we take ‘life’ as his friend not returning, and if we take the ‘friend’ as the friend Mamiya-san lost —then what about the ‘name’ at the end?”

I suddenly felt a chill down my back as if something slithered through.

It was—about that. It appeared in my head because for the past few days, I’d been flooded with all kinds of strange talk about ‘names’.

‘Um’, I asked.

“Krishna-san, have you heard of ‘The Scholomance university of magic’?”

“…Hm?”

“It was said to have existed in the Balkan peninsula or something.”

That was the university of witches that the mysterious young girl whispered to me about. And originally, it was blurted out by the enigmatic Noh faced man I met in front of university that day.

“I heard that the disciples of the witch were made to dedicate themselves to researching the origins of names of things in that university.”

“Well, that’s very knowledgeable of you.”

I received a rare complement.

“The Scholomance university of magic is an ancient European legend of obscure origin that has passed down through the ages. It is said that the university has a large library where you could research the true names of every event and creature in this world. According to one theory, it might perhaps be another name for the Akashic Records, but there are still very few references to it in Japan… and I thought I would go research it in more detail once, and…huh? How did you find out about such an obscure story?”

“Well, ummm… I think it was on the net? I forgot, haha.”

In a panic, I made something up,

“Anyway, I recalled it with the word ‘name’. Why were the disciples of the witch made to only repeat the same thing – in short, why were they made to only research the origin of the names of things? Are things like names really that important?”

“They are. Names are what bind the entirety of living things to the world. To wear the W in witch[4], would ultimately mean to forget who you are. Conversely, if one were to regain their ‘true name’, the worn ‘W’ would be--”

Thereupon, Krishna-san suddenly sunk into silence. Her head was slung down, gesturing as if she were biting down her nails with her fingers to her lips.

“Krishna-san?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Saying that, Krishna-san gave a forced smile.

However, that smile illuminated by the sunset looked exceedingly fleeting—

I was suddenly seized with the illusion that she would end up disappearing.

Unconsciously, I was about to reach out my hand to her soft cheeks

to keep her tied down to this world.

“Anyway, I’ll be staying here for a little longer.”

The bobbed haired former occult site manager declared to me in a mechanical voice.

“—You can do as you like.”

○

At night, the chirping of the insects became even more terrible.

On top of that, the cries of some unknown mountain bird echoed from deep in the mountains.

Hyaeeeeee… it was a creepy voice, like that of an old woman crying out. I turned over in my sleep, thinking that if that was the type of sound heard by people in ancient times, then it’s no wonder that they thought that monsters lived in the mountains.

It was already half past one o'clock. In the end, I took the favor from the Mamiya household and stayed there. I was served a supper of wild vegetables in a hotpot, and I was even offered to take a bath which made it feel like I was at a resort, but it felt disgusting that I couldn’t change my underwear---well, that’s not it, these murky feelings weren’t because of underwear.

They arose from having completely deviated from my original objective. To begin with, I was going to ask Krishna-san to elaborate on what happened when I woke up in the hospital.

Who was it that came to visit me in the hospital room that day? The fact that I screamed when I saw them—and, why did I end up forgetting everything about them in the present? I went to the clubroom to ask her those things, but I, who have a reputation for being the best in the Kanto region at getting involved in the creepiest things there are, was as expected, being swept away once more. Before I realized, I ended up staying overnight at a mansion in the mountains. But—well, I’m together with Krishna-san this time, so I’m

not too worried. That was fine, but the problem was the murky figure of someone who kept appearing and disappearing beyond the haze in my head.

They were slender and dark. I felt a chill and creepiness, but at the same time it was an awfully nostalgic, and loving feeling. The voice I heard the other day in 'The Overlapping House' felt the same. Was the person I ended up forgetting, the owner of that voice? I couldn't help but feel -- that I had stepped foot into the depths of darkness countless times in the past together with that voice.

『…Hey, are you scared?』

Suddenly, that voice like a ringing bell passed through my ears once more.

It was accompanied by goosebumps and reminded me of a strange loneliness. And at the same time, an excitement of twisted delight. A floating feeling as if nothing lay beneath my feet--and paradoxically, an adventurous pleasure which made me strongly feel that I was alive.

That's right, at any rate, my real feelings at this point were—

That I wanted to meet them once more. I absolutely hated the thought of never seeing them again.

Before I realized, I had sat up.

A mountain bird cried out again somewhere, and the pale blue moonlight peeked in through the window curtains.

"…Ah, I see."

In the deep mountains, a mansion inhabited by an old man who could not leave the mansion. It was a situation that twisted just enough, and yet. Even though a ghost story that somehow didn't add up was right there— but why aren't you here anywhere?

That was the kind of loneliness I was feeling.

When—

Suddenly, I heard two knocks on the door.

I thought I might have misheard and merely stared at the door from my bed, when—

“…Nagi-kun, are you awake?”

I heard Krishna-san’s voice.

“I, I’m awake.”

I rushed to the door and placed my hand on the doorknob and opened it.

In the dark corridor, Krishna-san stood small and quiet dressed in strawberry pajamas.

--Gwah—Cute, super cute.

Why was she clutching a pillow, is what I wanted to ask her until morning, but this was Krishna-san we're talking about, it wasn't because she wanted to sleep together in my room or something like that, but rather, she was just anxious about something and carried it with her. Then, the problem was, just what made her anxious enough to go running to a man's room in the middle of the night?

“W-w-what’s wrong?”

I asked, and in reply, “Is it alright for a bit?” She apologetically pointed inside my room.

I vigorously nodded. I’ll say it once more, but this person’s maturity with regards to the subtleties between men and women stopped at the middle school level, so this was in no way a night crawl. It was not – but as expected, my heart which was in its springtime of life couldn’t help but throb rapidly to the point of bursting at the sight of her entering in a single thin pajama in in the middle of the night.

Krishna-san pitter-pattered into the room and sat down on a chair next to the table by the window, and while still clutching her pillow, breathed a sigh.

“…Ummm.”

I called out to her, respectfully keeping a little distance from her by sitting at the corner of the bed.

“It’s about Karasu-san, I couldn’t sleep because it’s bothering me.”

Ahh, I nodded. I didn’t say anything, not knowing how to respond immediately.

“Say, Nagi-kun. Didn’t Karasu-san die – because she threw away her name?”

“…Eh?”

“I realized it when you told me about the Scholomance university of magic. I knew the importance of names—and how dangerous it was to throw one’s name away—and yet…. I never pointed it out to Karasu-san.”

“Wa, wait a minute.”

I denied it as best I could.

“Karasu-san abandoned her name to get away from something, right? And rather than throwing it away, she took the new name of ‘Karasu’,

and moreover, she seemed to like it a lot, didn't she? It’s not your fault, Krishna-san.”

It seemed like it still weighed on Krishna-san. She continued to blame herself, not that it was her fault, but that she could have done more. And I finally understood that this was the impetus for trying to do something on this occasion—here in this mansion.

“Nagi-kun, I relied on Karasu-san you see.”

“…….”

“I think I relied on her too much. I was only in charge of updating articles on Ikaigabuchi. Even if a lot of things happened, I thought it was all fine as long as Karasu-san laughed, and even when I stepped into really dangerous territory, a part of me would feel relieved when I saw her. I would be relieved thinking that this person had stepped into the world beyond far longer than I had, and despite that, she was smiling so joyfully like this, so I should still be okay too---”

“…Krishna-san.”

“Despite that….to die so suddenly like that…. It really was dangerous after all, that’s what it means, right? No, I’m not grieving over the fact that Karasu-san died – I'm afraid that I might be swallowed by the abyss next. That is---that is, just the worst, isn’t it?”

--That’s not it.

I wanted to say that that’s not it, but, I lacked the words to say what I wanted, and on top of that, I was lacking in knowledge and couldn’t find the right words to tell Krishna-san right now. Despite that, I clearly thought that that wasn’t it--- that’s it, I’ll use that. The words that helped me from the invisible someone in the ‘Overlapping house’.

『You are not broken.』

『Because – you can still ‘fear’.』

…That's right, that was exactly it. Feeling fear was a normal human trait, and that's how humans can distance themselves from danger—and the really dangerous individuals have had their 'fear' extinguished altogether and….

…Wait.

Thereupon, I recalled.

"…That's right. There's something I absolutely have to ask you, Kri--"

However, it happened at that moment.

From somewhere in the mansion, I heard the scream of a man.

In the darkness, Krishna-san too looked back.

"….Did you hear that?"

Krishna-san asked me, and I vaguely nodded. After that, we both held our breath. We strained our ears, but didn't hear anything again.

"….Let's go--- and check."

Krishna-san withdrew the weak expression she had just been making. In its stead was the charismatic manager who formerly administered one of Japan's largest occult websites.

We slowly opened the door, and peered down the corridor. The corridor was illuminated by auxiliary lights modeled after lanterns; We could easily see at our feet. Krishna-san took the lead, and slowly made her way forward, and I followed. We arrived at the stairs, and when she peeked at the bottom of the stairs, Krishna-san put her fingers to her lips. I, too, tried to hold my breath as I peered down below.

There was the old man.

He was walking unsteadily, and had a gown sloppily worn over his sleepwear. For some reason, he held a candlestick with a candle in hand, which gave him the appearance of a ghost.

Eventually, after confirming that the old man had returned to his room, I asked Krishna-san.

“That voice just now…was it his?”

The bobbed haired former manager shook her head and said, “I don’t know”. After that, we slowly began to descend the stairs, step-by-step.

As I checked the non-slip surface of the stairs with my bare feet, I began to feel as if the scene I had just witnessed had been a dream. His hair was grizzled and disheveled, and his eyes were hollow. His pale complexion looked even paler, yet his arms alone, which resembled withered branches, felt strangely darkened—

“Um, didn’t he just go to the toilet?”

I spoke as if to shake off the detestable chill, when Krishna-san stopped halfway down the stairs for a moment and asked me in return,

“Why did he need a candle when the lights in the corridor were switched on? Moreover, if the voice just now belonged to the old man…. Then I’m concerned as to why none of the servants came out. Could it be that this is a routine occurrence?”

“….”

“But if that's the case —I feel like there’s something there which can unravel the old man’s mystery.”

When she arrived at the bottom of the stairs, Krishna-san silently crouched down on the floor. She seemed to be clawing her fingers on the dark red carpet.

“…What’s wrong?”

“Look, Nagi-kun. There’s a trail of wax that dripped down.”

“Ah…”

“If we were to follow it--”

Krishna-san then proceeded down the corridor in a crouched position. I took a gulp and followed her cute looking behind as it swung from side to side. There was indeed a trail of dripped wax that continued every meter or so. And it continued down the corridor, but —

"…Unh."

Krishna-san suddenly stopped, and my face almost came into contact with her behind.

"What happened?"

"It's a dead end."

"…Eh?"

I looked up and sure enough, at the end of the corridor was a wall. In front of the wall, there was only an ornamental plant, a low table, and an expensive-looking vase of flowers on it.

"Does the wax continue here? Did you make a mistake on the way?"

Krishna-san went back a few meters, and traced after the dripped wax once more before returning,

"No, without a doubt it's leading this…"

As she declared that, she slowly raised her head. She then continued to gaze motionlessly at a part of the wall.

"…Nagi-kun?"

She suddenly lowered her voice even further and pointed somewhere.

"Isn't this, a door…?"

"……"

I, too, drew close and touched the wall with my fingertips.

--Aah, that's right. It had been painted the same color as the wall, but the material was different.

“But, how is it opened…?”

I looked around as if to soothe my heart which had begun to throb violently once more.

And that’s when I noticed it. There was a spot under the wall that was slightly stained. A point that looked as if it had been touched by hand countless times. I managed to press it somehow, when—

I heard a clicking sound from somewhere, and one part of the wall simply flipped the other way.

However—beyond it was merely darkness. No—there was a path that continued endlessly, only a few meters wide.

“……”

“……”

--*Gulp* My throat sounded. I couldn’t help but feel a terrible premonition. I thought that this path was a truly unpleasant path. If you were to ask me why that was, I couldn’t answer well, but—there was a dampness, and a rotten smell that assailed my nostrils. I was hesitant to proceed further from here.

“—Nagi-kun.”

At that moment, Krishna-san’s nervous voice reached my ears; I turned around and was startled.

There was a human there with an expression of shock who had seen something impossible. Even though it was such a familiar face, it had an expression so drained of blood that I had never seen before – my face.

That’s right, the other side of the wall door that had flipped open was covered… by a polished mirror.

“A m…mirror? In this mansion? And…why is it on the backside of the wall door?”

“I don’t know… but there’s something strange.”

“W-w-what’s that?”

“There is no light whatsoever in this corridor.”

“…Huh?”

“In short, it means that when this door is closed, it’s impossible to use this mirror.”

With a shiver, something cold crawled down my back.

“Then, why is this mirror set up here? In the first place, where does this path lead--”

Then, it happened as Krishna-san was muttering to herself.

From somewhere, a rustling sound rang out, as if something was being dragged.

With a start, Krishna-san and I looked at the end of the dark corridor. We strained our eyes beyond the darkness.

…Huh…did something, move….?

In the darkness, something even darker moved—like it was drawing closer to us.

The light in the corridor through the doorway was not enough to illuminate the far end of the passage.

However— I could vaguely make out the outline of the thing that moved.

The moment I realized that it was like that of a person—

“K-Krishna-san…!”

I recoiled backwards as if collapsing, and grabbed the edge of Krishna-san’s pajamas.

“Nagi-kun….W, we can’t stay here!”

Her voice was the signal to prompt us both to turn around and run away, when—

We bumped into something, the unexpected impact startled us, and we fell down on the spot. We raised our faces to check what was blocking our path—I let out an “Eek” involuntarily, and Krishna-san had her mouth agape on the spot without a word.

There was the pale face of this mansion’s proprietor.

His complexion was like a corpse, and he wore a smile on his wrinkled face.

“Get away as fast as you can.”

The old man spoke in a frolicking tone.

“Before that thing gets you.”

○

“L-le-le-let’s…. go back already!”

The next day, after sunrise, I visited Krishna-san’s room and told her that.

“That proprietor is strange. And there’s also definitely something strange about this mansion.”

“I know already.”

Krishna-san was writing something indifferently on a table next to the window. Without even glancing in my direction, and without resting her hand, she ignored my desperate pleas.

Last night, after what happened, we returned to our separate rooms and went to bed, but in the end, I couldn’t sleep a wink. Just what was that path hidden in the wall? Why was there a mirror on the

back of the wall door to the entrance of that path? And--- what was that shadow beyond the path that seemed to be drawing close?

Now as I recalled it once more, a cold shiver rose up from beneath my feet.

Wasn't that a person? It felt as if it was hectically shaking its head from side to side, looking for something. And it was like that arm wasn't there, like it had fallen off…

No. No, that was because I heard that proprietor's old story. I had known that information beforehand, so I mistook something like that —that's right, in short was a 'schema'. The thing where stains on the wall look like a person's face.

As I was absorbed in driving away my fears,

"You need to get back to Musashino right away."

Krishna-san told me with her back towards me.

"….Eh. What are you going to do, Krishna-san?"

"I'm, going to stay here for a little while longer."

"Y…you'd better give up. Then, you should at least call those ghost specialists. You know, the people in charge of Ikaigabuchi investigations you always call for…."

"I can't. They all have their own individual fields of expertise. I don't know who to call unless we uncover the root of the misfortune that binds this mansion. At the very least, I must determine that root."

Thereafter, Krishna-san stopped her writing hand, and muttered quietly, "Moreover, if I were to return now."

"If you were to return?"

"I won't make it up to Karasu-san."

"Karasu-san has nothing to do with it, right? In the first place, would Karasu-san be happy if you stayed in a place like this?"

“Just a little bit more… I have a feeling something will pop up.”

Krishna-san turned back and handed to me what appeared to be a sealed letter.

“When you get back to Musashino, give this to Sako-san.”

“…To Sako?”

Krishna-san nodded, and her eyes shone with a glint suggesting that she wanted to say something—when I suddenly understood.

“Could it be that this is about my memories?”

“……..”

“I’ve really forgotten someone, haven’t I? Did you and Sako do something to me? Why?”

However, Krishna-san kept silent, biting her lips.

We were getting nowhere, so I put my hand on her small shoulder.

“At any rate let’s go back together. Or maybe it would be better to call that bastard Sako.”

“I can’t do that.”

Krishna-san refused as if to brush off my hand.

“I’m always relying on other people. Even though I have no power to deal with ghosts, I thought I would do something outrageous like promote the segregation of ghosts and people, not knowing my place. And who knows how many people -- ended up dead because of me.”

“Krishna-san, that wasn’t your fau…”

“Is that really the case? Say, Nagi-kun. Can you say that with absolute certainty?”

My hand stopped at that desperate scream—at those tears that flowed from her large eyes.

“I can’t forgive myself…if I can’t at least fix this problem properly by myself.”

○

“—Now then. Have you figured out the identity of the thing in the mirror?”

Beyond the deliciously steaming breakfast, the old man smiled.

“…No, not yet.”

Krishna-san hung her head down,

“It’s fine, we have an abundance of time. Please make yourselves comfortable.”

The old man kindly declared with a hoarse voice.

Outside the window, a slight drizzle had begun before I realized. Illuminated by the faint sunshine, the table was lined with grilled river fish, pickled vegetables, bamboo miso soup, and freshly cooked rice.

And in the end--- I ended up receiving that food together with Krishna-san and the old man.

As I listened to the birds chirping, I thought the food was delicious, while at the same time feeling that I was pathetic.

“It’s good to have someone to talk to.”

The old man spoke to Krishna-san after partaking in a small mouthful of food.

“You are still young, but we have always had smooth communication. There is progress there. Let us have a meaningful, quality debate, unencumbered by ethical excesses.”

“…Last night.”

“Hm?”

“Is it alright if I ask about the path at the end of the corridor?”

In response, the old man, whose face which was once handsome in the past, creased its wrinkles—and broadly grinned.

“Please forget about it.”

“……”

“It is something that is not supposed to exist. Our nature as human beings to make things exist that are not supposed to exist - isn't that the true nature of a ghost?”

“In all likelihood, you are correct.”

Krishna-san spoke.

“However, the thing we saw last night was real.”

“And what exactly… did you see?”

“….Eh?”

“I did not see anything—and yet you included me in the ‘we’ you spoke of?”

“No, I definitely-- in the end of that corridor—Hey, Nagi-kun, you saw it as well, right?”

She suddenly swung my way, and in a panic, I gulped down the grains of rice in my mouth.

“Ermmm, right, it was like… I saw something.”

“Right? There must have been something - or someone - at the end of the corridor.”

Krishna-san insisted stubbornly, but as for me, it was pathetic that I didn’t truly trust my own perceptions. Even though I was an occult

enthusiast, I was even more of a wimp, and I thought that the possibility was high that it was a schema rather than a person, something I always thought when I cooled off. Looking at it now that it's morning, I even ended up thinking that it must have all been my imagination.

"That was -- yes, I think it was a woman with long hair."

…….Eh?

Krishna-san muttered that as she tried unusually hard to compose herself…. No, but what I saw was more like a man, something that had no arm and was hectically shaking its head from side to side.

In response—the old man cackled in a creepy manner.

"That's how human perception is, Kurimoto-kun. Things like memories can manufacture several things later on. As long as humans are subjective living things, all memories without exception, receive slight revision. And, the more people with power speak of that, the more their subjective, vague and uncertain memories are recorded as authentic history. They say that the history is written by the victors – but it sure is scary, isn't it, this world?"

Those were—

The type of words Krishna-san would usually point out before anything else, I thought.

Krishna-san would always question herself first. She would question all the ghost stories of this world, and she would go to the limits to eliminate even the slightest possibility of misinformation being mixed in. She strongly believed that fear came from ignorance.

Right now, Krishna-san was biting her lips. It was probably the regret of having ended up uttering what she saw herself (or what she felt she saw).

…Ah, come to think of it.

She said something about 'racial conflict' in the taxi on the way here. She then moved to 'A history of human conflict', and 'Terrible things

having quietly started somewhere'. You often see this type of thinking on the internet where current events are interpreted as grand evil signs. What are commonly called 'conspiracy theories'. Krishna-san knew better than anyone else about how dangerous it was to start believing in conspiracy theories, but she still ended up uttering them— she must be feeling a sense of danger about herself. Was….that the real reason she closed Ikaigabuchi?

I thought that far, when I finally realized.

If the one-armed man I saw (or I felt I saw) was the 'deceased friend' imagined from the story of the old man named Mamiya---then the long haired woman Krishna-san saw…could it be?

Karasu-san?

Feeling responsibility for the death of Karasu-san, could Krishna-san's heart be—

Much, much thinner than I thought, on the verge of being worn out?

○

--Krishna-san, was already in danger.

After I finished eating breakfast, I borrowed an umbrella and went outside to take a walk by myself in the garden, where I took out my phone.

I had not brought my charger along, so I couldn't rely on the remaining battery anymore. I thought it would indeed be best to call Sako before it went dead. It was infuriating that I had to rely on him, but the situation was so urgent that I couldn't afford to take my time. In the end, I called Sako's number after looking him up in my contacts list.

The ringing tone rang from the other end of the line.

It continued to ring.

However, even after thirty or so rings, no one picked up. It didn't even go to voicemail.

"…That bastard, he really is useless when it comes to the crux of things."

I clicked my tongue as I cut the call.

As I listened to the raindrops bouncing on my umbrella, I glared at the ground as I thought to myself.

I didn't think it would be useful for me if I stayed here. But on the other hand, I was worried about leaving Krishna-san here and going back to Musashino alone. I couldn't help but feel a terrible premonition. I would try contacting Sako again after a while--- no, if my battery died before I could contact him, then—As I started thinking such things over and over again, a stinging pain struck my right elbow after a long time.

I pulled up my sleeves and checked the scar. As usual, the stitch marks were painful to look at. The discolored wound had considerably blended in color with the surrounding flesh, but it looked like a bruise that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

As I massaged it, I somehow felt as if Karasu-san were angry at me.

"…What am I doing, really?"

I muttered to myself, when I suddenly realized.

I hurriedly turned the phone on and looked at my call history.

--Ah, I knew it.

There were many names in the call history I was familiar with, but among them was a name I had no recollection of.

It was the peculiar name, 'Yoishi Mitsurugi'. Moreover, there were a considerable number of incoming and outgoing calls displayed in the call history. The calls were terribly short each time, but to have

exchanged calls so many times with this person—I had no memories of that.

….Who…are you….?

I looked at the contact information once more. All that was there was the name, ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’, with no address, the fact that they might be an associate from work, or that they may be someone related to Ikaigabuchi, there was no memo like that at all.

However, as I gazed at the name, a strange feeling of nostalgia filled my heart. When engulfed with an incomprehensible fear, there was no one more reliable than this person…. No, on the contrary, did they actually amplify the fear? I didn’t know which one it was, but at any rate, it was a name that gave me a hunch that it would give me a breakthrough when I didn’t know what to do.

“……”

After hesitating for several seconds – I looked at their phone number, and pressed the call button.

As I gulped, I heard the ringback tone several times.

Eventually, the call connected.

＜……＞

“…Ah, hello.”

For the time being, I muttered that, but afterwards, I didn’t know what to say.

Someone stayed silent on the other end of the line.

“…Ah, umm…. Sorry for calling you out of the blue. I’m the one who called, but I don’t know you. No, I probably don’t remember. That is, ah, I’m Nagito Yamada. I had an accident a little while ago. I think it’s because of that — my memory is scattered in places. That’s why I called this number from the call history of my phone. I have called you many times before. That’s why, I thought we might have been on close terms, but…sorry, I don’t remember you.”

<……..>

“Sorry for this weird phone call, but I’m in a situation right now that’s even weirder. I need your help. Just a little--- just a little is fine, I want you to hear this story like this.”

At that moment, I heard a warning vibrate from my phone, *Beep* *Beep* *Beep*.

“Aw shit. My battery is low, so I’ll explain the situation from my side.”

I told everything that happened so far to someone I didn’t even remember.

That I was in the heart of Okutama, in the secondary residence of a rich man named Ryouichi Mamiya. The story about him having ventured into a forbidden cave ignoring three warnings and that a strange riddle had appeared here in a mansion where that old man lived. That I had seen a creepy path late at night. The fact that even though the house had no mirrors, that there was a mirror there. And above all, the strange state that Krishna-san was in. I don’t know what sequence of events I explained it all in, but I was incoherent without a doubt. I didn’t know if the person on the other end of the line understood me, but at any rate, I was in a hurry and desperately tried to explain everything that came to my head to the person on the other end of the line.

“….I mean, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, and it’ll be dangerous if things keep going on like this.”

<……>

Despite that, the so-called ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ remained silent.

It occurred to me that they might have been upset that I did not remember them.

“…I’m sorry for not remembering you.”

I spoke.

“It really is, a nonsensical phone call, isn’t it….but, I’m--”

When the phone went dead.

I looked to see that it had completely drained.

“….Ahh.”

“What’s wrong?”

I was suddenly called out to, and turned around to see Krishna-san standing there.

She had also borrowed an umbrella, and came out to the pouring garden, with a slight smile on her face. The color of her face seemed to have recovered a little since breakfast.

“I’m… still staying here.”

I answered and looked away from Krishna-san, who looked like she wanted to say something, and put my phone away.

○

Thunder roared.

The rain had gotten heavier since last night, and had begun to violently thrash the ground.

I pushed past Krishna-san’s opposition, and in the end, ended up staying for the third consecutive night in that strange mansion.

“This house is basically quite cozy…”

I muttered to myself as I gazed out at the falling rain through the window of the guest room.

The library was lined with countless interesting books and had a sound facility that was somewhat old but seemed to have good sound. The mansion was surrounded by a fresh forest of maple trees and sawtooth oaks, with benches set up here and there. All the rooms had air conditioning, but it was neither hot nor cold in this mansion, which was surrounded by trees in early spring. It was the perfect place to stop and think at one's leisure.

Even today, I woke up this morning to be served with a warm breakfast prepared by the servants, ate and engaged in some pleasant conversations and listened to the old man's old stories, and ended up getting served lunch before I'd realized it. I thought I had to take Krishna-san back with me today, but when the old man and Krishna-san began some deep conversation, I lost my place and came up to the room prepared for me on the second floor to rethink my strategy, but before I realized, all I was doing was gazing out at the falling rain.

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon.

If I were to go down now, I'd be served afternoon tea and cakes, then I'd be pushed along into dinner, and then I'd submerge myself in the spacious and comfortable bath and the day would be over. I'd be tempted to lie down on the soft bed and go straight into another overnight course. And I'd be wearing the same underpants for four days, a terrible sight to behold.

A comfort that's like lukewarm water.

That was the root of my fear of this mansion.

In this mansion where time seems to have stopped, where only silence and thoughts remained, it became impossible to have an overhead view of where you were. The university lectures and part-time job that used to keep me busy day after day became unimportant, and I even ended up thinking that my missing memories were something trivial and not worth worrying about.

It was a dreadful feeling as if I was slowly dissolving. It was a lukewarm fear that If I didn't make a determined decision to leave in some way, that I would become imprisoned in this mansion forever.

For example, I realized it when I saw Krishna-san in the garden this morning.

How should I say it, it felt as if color continued to disappear from Krishna-san. The thing she originally had, the vitality of a Bodhisattva that overflowed from her much more than a normal human, continued to go down, is how I might explain it. At any rate, everything was fleeting, and there was a fear there that she would become transparent and end up disappearing at this rate.

『…K, Krishna-san.』

At that time, I thought it was without a doubt dangerous and called out to her. But I didn't know what to say or do from there. With her bobbed hair and charming baby face in front of me, my body didn't move, and no words came out. I just said, “Nothing”, and looked away with no plan of a breakthrough, and all I could say was. 『I'm still staying here.』

However, I was sure that nothing would change for the better if I just kept reminiscing and looking out of the window. So, I finally took action — I stood up from the chair by the window, and went downstairs.

In the living room with a hearth on the first floor, both Krishna-san and the proprietor were sitting opposite to each other on the sofa, and at times both were conversing with a smile on their faces.

“I believe that's the first time I've heard of such an opinion regarding the true identity of Oshira-sama.[5]”

“No, it's an unfounded fancy that just popped into my head.”

“No, no, I don't think this is an opinion that comes up unless you do a lot of fieldwork.”

Thereupon, I joined in.

“What is Oshira-sama?”

In response, Krishna-san blatantly scowled.

“Nagi-kun, you haven’t even read Tōno Monogatari yet?”

“…Ah, err, it’s written in a classic style that’s difficult to read, so.”

“There are modern translations as well now. I’m always telling you that you shouldn’t just read ghost stories on the internet.”

“S-sorry.”

“Well, let’s leave him be.”

With the proprietor’s words, the conversation between the two moved on to an incomprehensible direction once more. They talked about stuff like the earth’s axis, and Longmai[6]. I could sit down on the sofa next to Krishna-san, but I couldn't get into the conversation at all.

At that moment, a bright light shone outside the window.

After a moment’s delay, the terrifying sound of thunder reverberated in its stead.

“….Damn, that was close!”

I unconsciously shouted out loud, but the proprietor and Krishna-san continued their conversation as if they had gotten used to it. At that moment, lightning flashed again, illuminating the old man's profile. His wrinkled face, which was supposed to have been handsome in his youth, was dyed in a golden color for an instant--- and I shuddered.

In a panic, I rubbed my eyes.

Just now, in an instant, I felt like I saw a completely different face appear in the light—but, was it because of the light?

The proprietor was smiling as usual. But it felt as if the number of wrinkles were increasing day by day. Despite that, it felt as if rather than growing old, he continued to swell with vigor. It might have been because he gained a conversational partner in Krishna-san with whom he could talk to on an equal intellectual level (according to the proprietor). It might have been because his brain was being rapidly stimulated.

However, that was of course not a happy thing for me, it was something that made me feel a strange disgust. I couldn't help but feel a slimy sense of corrosion, as if something precious to me were being devoured by an old, ravenous beast.

"Now then, have you figured out the answer yet, Kurimoto-kun?"

After a break in the conversation, the old man asked Krishna-san as he sipped his black tea.

The answer— It was about the incident he mentioned. The question: 『What is the identity of the thing inside the mirror?』. As I looked at Krishna-san's downcast profile from the side, I too desperately tried to think. In the past, this old man abandoned his best friend in the depths of a cave. Or he thought he had, and continued to feel guilty about it to this day. Krishna-san was of the same opinion up to that point. Which meant that in short, that thing he saw was his 'best friend' who supposedly died. But for me, there was another possibility that I couldn't get rid of.

That was—

The 'something' that had been in the depths of the cave from the very beginning.

'Something' that had been called a 'mountain god' since ancient times, that issued three warnings to the young man and his best friend. Had it not possessed this old man? Wasn't that the cause of this inhuman presence I felt from this old man?

I looked at Krishna-san, wondering how she would respond---

"…I'm sorry, I don't know."

The bobbed haired former occult site manager hung her head in regret.

"It's nothing to be concerned about."

And the old man nodded happily.

"We have all the time in the world."

….Ah, dammit, what was it?

An intense feeling of disgust swelled up inside me, and I stood up from the sofa. With a feeling of frustration as if I had my foot caught in a bottomless marshland, and a mixture of anger at myself for being unable to help Krishna-san as my crutch, I got up and spoke.

“I got it.”

“Oh?”

The old man looked my way with zero sense of expectation.

“Please tell me.”

“You are… the ‘mountain god’.”

Lightning struck outside the window once more, and for an instant the lights in the room went out. Perhaps that’s why I ended up being convinced that my half-baked answer was correct, *Cough*, the old man’s laughter rang out together with the lights turning back on, making me feel somewhat embarrassed.

“I am honored to be thought of as a mountain god.”

“Y, you went to a forbidden cave with your best friend. You heard some kind of voice there. But, you lost your memories from there, and when you came to, your best friend didn’t return. In short--”

“Ah, I see. So you want to say that I’ve been possessed by a mountain god. Quite amusing.”

It felt as if something else inside the old man’s wrinkles sneered.

“Let’s talk by stepping down to your level. Then what do you think the mountain god is?”

“Eh….what do I think….ummm… god is god, right?”

“In this country, those who are considered as gods are deceased noblemen, something that percolated from the other world, or nature itself, which one of those I wonder?”

“H, how the hell am I supposed to know something like that?”

“Why was the cave forbidden to enter in the first place?”

“……”

“Is God not the general term for the supernatural, that which is beyond human comprehension? Why do humans deem God as necessary? That is to escape from fear. When struck with a condition that far surpasses the capacity of human understanding, humans speak of God. Fear that flows from the depths of humans is called God. In short fear itself is the true form of God, so how can I be the god of the mountain since I felt fear of the other side of the mirror?”

“…….”

“Ahh, how exhausting.”

The old man sat deep back in his chair, and spoke in an exhausted tone of voice.

“I said it before. A world that caters to fools leads to a slow death. Listen, if you’ve learned your lesson, then don't even think about interfering in the conversation between Kurimoto-kun and myself. Fools should at least realize that they are being spoken to like fools.”

……Ungh.

I was humiliated, but I had no reply. Krishna-san too had her head downcast, and I too pathetically continued to look down on the ground, when--

“Master.”

The maid called out.

“Another guest has arrived, is it alright if I allow them in?”

However, before that voice could even finish,

“…Ah, please…wait, please wait in that room.”

I heard that voice and turned around, to see the maid in a panic restraining someone.

However, eventually, the maid staggered as if pushed aside; Something entered the room.

In the space absent of anyone—that voice echoed, like a ringing bell.

(Which one is the fool, I wonder?)

That voice--- that frigid voice in the darkness that echoed like a bell from the other world, reached my ears.

(If you were to define fools as those who don’t realize they are fools, then there are those who don’t even realize that it applies to them.)

However, that figure was nowhere to be seen.

All I could feel was long black hair swirling in a spiral.

And, the terrifying presence in that voice alone—was what I felt in that ‘Overlapping house’.

“…T…that voice… you are…”

My mutter overlapped with Krishna-san’s voice at the same time.

“Yo…Yoishi…? Why are you here….?”

--Yoishi…? My mouth was agape, as I looked in the direction the voice came from, then at the old man, and finally at Krishna-san.

Krishna-san had her head face down somewhat apologetically—

Could it be?

Could it be that the owner of that voice was ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’?

“Oh, what a cute young lady.”

The old man let out a merry voice.

“Welcome, to my mansion.”

In response, the young girl that was still only a voice to me whispered.

(Fools destroy this world--- I strongly agree with that theory. However, you don't know what a true fool is.)

“Interesting, please do explain.”

(Often in this world, the wise must go along and converse with fools. That is correct. The wise arrive at the truth of this world before the fools, and despair of their own inadequacies more often than the fool —that too is correct. However, you don’t realize that as long as humans are creatures who live by emotion, the aggregate amount of despair is the same.)

“…Oh?”

(Indeed, there might be fewer fools who may be aware of their stupidity in comparison to the wise. But, as long as the aggregate amount of emotion is the same, the wise experience the self-hate ten different times whereas the fool only experiences ten times all at once. When they realize and understand it, the despair they felt would be ten times greater. And, that which the exceedingly sensitive fool experiences is a hundred times more worthy than the insensitive wise man —That is this person. You could not withstand even a small portion of the pain this person has experienced thus far. As long as there are circumstances worth sympathizing in, this person is an extraordinary fool who will walk together with them be they the living or the dead—No matter how much someone tries to stop him, he still plunges into the abyss in tears, a person who endured it all.)

For some reason, the back of my nose prickled.

(The wise living by getting along with fools? You can talk from above and feel good about it all you want, but that is an exceedingly laughable thing. The fool who cannot see ahead is the first to realize what lies at their feet. They are diligently moving the pebbles at their feet, one by one, day by day, which the wise do not care about. That's why, the self-proclaimed wisemen are able to look ahead without falling down.)

"How interesting."

The old man cried out in excitement, and at the same time, another violent thunderbolt struck yet again.

And I noticed that the feet of the young girl, who was only a voice, were dripping wet. It seemed the so-called 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' had come soaking wet in the rain, in response to my call for help.

"Krishna-san."

I asked.

"…This girl with only a voice--- the girl everyone can see, why am I the only one who can't see her?"

"……That's."

"But she's Yoishi, isn't she?"

"Nagi-kun…. You were shaken up pretty badly back then. You were lashing out, wailing and afraid. That's why--"

"….Right. I ended up calling her a monster."

"……"

"I called her a monster, I feared her, and ended up crying and screaming."

"…That's right."

"I still don't know why that was. But, even if she was a monster---she answered my call, and came to help in the rain here in the

mountains. I've never seen such a monster with a strong sense of duty."

Thereupon, the voice echoed once more.

(The thing that gazes at you from inside the mirror--- If you really want to know its true identity, I'll tell you.)

"Ho, ho."

The old man sat back down happily.

"By all means, please, young lady."

In response, I suddenly heard a *Shing*.

It seemed that 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' had flicked a glass on the table with her fingers.

(Venetian glass that's more than five-hundred years old—moreover, this is not 'Facon de Venise', but rather, an original from the island of Murano.)

"Oh, so you know of Murano originals."

(Originally, the exact origins of Venetian glass are shrouded in mystery. The method was said to have been established in the seventh or eighth century, and was considered top secret by the Republic of Venice at the time, with all craftsmen isolated on Murano Island.)

A nice sounding *shing* rang out once more.

The old man closed his eyes as if entranced by that tune. I, too, was caught up in it, and closed my eyes trying to imagine it as well.

(The small Murano Island is filled with workshops. As a result of the friendly competition between craftsmen called maestros, hard glass adorned with ornaments continues to be refined at a higher, more vivid quality.)

--*Shing* The sound of glass. Perhaps because I had closed my eyes,

the sound was more vivid than before. And, when I heard it again with the added explanation, I felt that the vivid sound had a different experience.

(The almost legendary fame these craftsmen earned gave them unparalleled respect. Their fame reached its peak in the fifteenth century, and they were at last commissioned to create the ‘Hall of Mirrors’ in the Palace of Versailles.)

…Hall of mirrors?

--*Shing* The sound reverberated.

(The Palace of Versailles was said to be a castle of Louis XIV, a palace within a palace. It is a vast place installed with mirrors, enough for the Hall of mirrors to be referred to as the ‘Corridor of Mirrors’, and in the ceiling is a famous decorative ceiling painting by the famous Charles Le Brun. In the painting, which is said to be a declaration of the king's own rule and a departure from the aristocracy, Louis XIV, the Sun King, holds a rudder in his right hand, blessed by angels and surrounded by various gods. The god of ‘wisdom’ Minerva, Mars the god of ‘war’, and the personification of ‘time’, the god of agriculture Saturn—all of them extoll Louis XIV.)

“…Umhmm.”

Again, a *shing*, the sound of glass rang out once more, and the old man comfortably chuckled in this throat.

At that moment, Krushna-san’s silent murmur reached my ears.

“…..Hypnotherapy, is it?”

…Hypno, therapy?

I thought I heard it somewhere before… As the word ‘therapy’ suggested, the rhythm of ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’s’ words was very relaxing. I was somehow convinced that the word therapy did apply, and I continued to keep my eyes shut as I listened in ecstasy—however, that was as far as it went for being enraptured.

(In the days of glory, a picture of glory—however, why is it I

wonder?)

Suddenly, the tone of Yoishi's voice dropped.

(There is one strange god in the painting. One god alone is illustrated with his back facing the king.)

"The god Pluto— Hades according to Greek mythology."

The old man answered with eyes still closed.

(That's exactly it. The sinister Pluto who holds dominion over death —That's why he has his back towards you who are blessed.)

"…Hmm…"

(You are now more blessed than all of creation. You have attained the self you were meant to achieve.)

--*Shing* The clear sound rings perfectly clear as if it covered the entire world.

(The light floods in —the power slowly leaves your body---it falls deeper and deeper into the sky.)

--*Shiiiiiiiiiing*, the sound reverberates all around me.

(That's right, before you know it, you are in a meadow.)

Together with her words—

My surroundings had somehow turned into a field thick with young fresh grass.

It was vast. A meadow that spread as far as I could see, as a gentle breeze blew past me.

(You proceed through the meadow. In the middle of the meadow, there is a large tree. An ancient, thick tree trunk that has experienced many years.)

(You put your hand on that trunk. You look at that hand. You realize who you are--)

(Are you a man, or a woman?)

"……A, a man."

The old man's croaky voice responded.

(A man around what age?)

"….Twenty seven, thereabout."

(You who are twenty-seven-years-old discover a large hole in the tree trunk. It's a very large hole….what is inside?)

"…..I don't know…it's pitch black…."

(Then let's slowly enter inside. It's alright, because you have a light in your hand.)

"….Yes…."

(Try to illuminate your arm with the light. What do you recall?)

"…Arm…arm….I…wanted to bulk it… because it was slightly thinner as compared to his….It weighed on my mind that it was thin compared to my best friend….."

(Where is that friend?)

"…..Where…next to me…he was always next to me….Aah….."

(Please shine a light on your friend.)

“….He’s here….he’s laughing…. His face is handsome like an actor….The man who instilled an uncountable sense of inferiority in me…..And, the man who was always kind to me…. I thought I wanted to be like this man…..No…..that’s not it…..”

(What – is not it?)

“The person who’s there….is me….where did my friend go….?”

(……..)

“This is….this is….a mirror isn’t it?! …..Eeek! My reflection….where did he go….?”

(No, that is not you.)

In the midst of the pitch-black darkness—the whispers of the young girl echoed.

“……What……?”

(That is because, you are not ‘Ryouichi Mamiya’. It is true that you are currently the chairman of the conglomerate ‘Mamiya Motors’ which boasts the largest market share of the Japanese market, but you are not the man who originally held the name of ‘Ryouichi Mamiya’.)

At that moment, something beyond the darkness that had its back turned moved sneakily.

With a forked shaku in hand[7], the indomitable brown colored back of Pluto, had turned around at some point.

And, at the same time, a sobbing scream that was enough to make you shudder rang out. That was, the voice of the old man.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…..I, I was……..No, I was…….that’s right, in the darkness--- I was told that one would be allowed to live. He said he would deliberately allow one of us to live. He said he would make me taste the sadness of having lost my friend until I died….It was no joke, I thought. It was no joke. I thought living my life being afraid of Mamiya’s shadow until my death was something I could never do. Even Fumiko, the one she really liked was Mamiya….I don’t think she would be swayed by me if Mamiya were to die…that’s why, I became Mamiya….because that was the best thing I could do.”

(No—that is how you justified it to yourself.)

‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ coldly condemned him.

(You stole a man’s name, and as a result, stole everything from him.)

However—the old man wasn’t listening anymore.

“No….I am the real…. Ryouichi Mamiya!”

As he shouted that, I heard the sound of something crashing down and falling somewhere.

Thereupon at long last, I opened my eyes.

I desperately looked around at the blurry world, as if a long dream still lingered, and realized that I was in the living room of that mansion, and that there were broken pieces of the so-called Venetian glass at my feet.

“….Forgive me. Mamiya, stop….”

I heard the scream of the old man at the end of the corridor, and Krishna-san and the maid broke off into a run.

I, too, got up, and tried to leave the room together with them, but—

I heard a *Shing* from somewhere once more.

With a start, I looked at the fragments of the broken glass lying scattered on the floor.

Once more, a clear, *Shing* reverberated.

It was in midair. Someone's white hand was on that glass, and the glass sounded in a high-pitched tone once more— and I understood that 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' was still there.

Then I remembered. That's right, I had read it once before on 'Ikaigabuchi'. About hypnotherapy being called 'Regression Hypnotherapy'.

You are made to hear a certain sound continuously. Words, the sound of glass, anything is fine. At any rate, under a certain rhythm, you are led to an altered state of consciousness. The manifestation of one's inner child. The adult self going to meet the child self, where unfulfilled emotions or complaints are addressed. To listen to 'The grievances you really wanted to vent'. And, what leads to that realization is—

A higher self. A self that is full of peace, faith, compassion and wisdom—Ah, in short, it was the decorative ceiling painting.

At that moment—the world was enveloped with an overwhelming light, and when I came to, I was in front of the university's western club building. The building was surrounded by Zelkova trees, and I was riding in front of it on my worn-out mama bike. For a brief period, I was at my happiest here. At any rate, I had to meet her, as I pedaled my bike, my heart beat throbbed, and I was out of breath. The scenery flew past behind me, and eventually, I arrived at the library I had aimed for. I hurriedly locked my bike and parked it, and I saw her come out of the library. "Yoishi!", I yelled. But, at the same time, I spotted a familiar shadow. It was Akane Nanamori. And I saw a long black shadow at her back---Is how I felt. After that….after that, ahh, I don't really remember. Before I'd realized, I had jumped onto the road, and in an instant, my vision was turned upside down, filled with the blue sky. I was thrown up into the sky.

After that---what happened?

In an instant, an intense *GONG* reverberated from the entire sky—

And suddenly, an unfamiliar family appeared. A family of four, all

smiling happily. A father, a mother, two daughters, and a small shaggy dog. No, it was not an unfamiliar family. I was very close, right besides this family--- and existed by receiving a share of their happiness—And.

I found out *something*.

I found out that this family hid a secret you wouldn't tell anyone.

『I couldn't save them.』

Someone's voice echoed in my head, a voice I didn't know—

And then, I was thrown out into a world of darkness.

It was a graveyard. And, it was---that's right. Last Christmas, I came here with her. It was almost midnight before Christmas, and here we were watching fireworks together. We were sitting on a bench, and I dearly hoped that I could see her smile, so I put my hands on her cheek—

However, there was no one there. Neither her long black hair, nor her beautiful face, transparent and white, was there by my side.

Or rather….there was, no one there.

I dizzily got up from the bench.

And I started walking in the dark cemetery, towards the row of countless gravestones.

Graves, Graves, Graves, Graves, Graves—the graves continued endlessly. Familiar names were inscribed on those graves. My mother's name was there. My elder sister's name was there. Friends from when I was a brat. My companions from my high school days. My acquaintances at university. Karasu-san's name was there, as well as Sako's. Krishna-san's name was there as well---and my name was also there.

"What…is this place?"

A wind blew through the open hole in my chest.

A sad wind blew through me, as I looked alone at a world where everything had ended.

A world where everyone had once cried, lost their temper, and laughed together.

It was as if the world had ended, as if it were a world of darkness where everything from the air to the temperature, to the microbes, had all disappeared.

I alone wandered unsteadily in that cold, silent darkness, and then I realized.

Her name alone— was missing.

The grave with the name of 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' alone was nowhere to be found.

---Are you, really…..called 'Yoishi'?

At that moment, I…I finally reached the question I needed the answer to above all else.

'Yoishi'—

One year ago, I found out about that ominous rumor,

And met her for the first time in a family restaurant late at night,

And, I began to wander around in the depths of countless paranormal phenomena, I ….that's right, I started calling her 'Yoishi' before I realized….and ended up believing that 'Yoishi' itself was her name.

However, that wasn't it—

Could it be that I, in fact, was not aware of her real name?

The next thing I knew—

I was in the living room of the mansion, standing stock still in a daze.

And before me, was a young girl all by herself.

She had long black hair, skin as white as porcelain, dressed in the Koumei school's black blazer uniform.

There was a dark color in her large eyes, as she looked at me.

"…Yo…."

"……"

"….Yo, Yoishi!"

What was her real name? Was it alright to call her by that name?

I still didn't know the answer to that, but in the end, I shouted that out loud, and hugged her so tight her arms might have broken.

"…….Fuugh."

Perhaps because she was surprised, Yoishi let out a strange voice like that of a mountain cat.

"Just for a bit. Call me a harasser or a pervert. Just let me stay like this, just for a little."

I begged her, and Yoishi's body, which stiffened for a moment, eventually relaxed little by little. I tenderly embraced that body once more. Thinking that it was thin and soft. She came all the way out here without an umbrella and was drenched in the rain, and some kind of strange scent prickled at my nose, but I couldn't help but feel nostalgic about all of that, so I held my cheeks against Yoishi's wet black hair, and spoke in a snotty, gravelly voice.

"….I'm sorry…I'm sorry for having forgotten about you. I'm sorry I couldn't….see you."

"……."

“And, most of all—I’m sorry I called you a monster.”

“……”

“You’re nothing at all like a monster. Definitely not.”

When I declared that—

“You can—see Yoishi…?”

I heard Krishna-san’s voice, and with a start, I raised my head.

It seemed she had returned to the room before I’d realized. There she was, flush red for some reason as she looked at me and Yoishi in an embrace. However, I didn’t care as I continued to embrace Yoishi and nodded.

“Krishna-san you---no, that bastard Sako made Yoishi invisible to me.”

“….That---couldn’t be helped. Back then, you were…”

…..Ah, I know already.

I remembered everything. Back then, in the hospital room, when I saw Yoishi, something about her scared me. I was helplessly afraid and delirious, I screamed, cried and lashed out. The doctors and nurses came one after the other and held me down---and I recalled the moment up until Sako touched my forehead. In all likelihood, that’s when that bastard Sako did something to me.

“I understand.”

Krishna-san looked at me with an expression distorted with worry, and I gently nodded.

“Hypnotherapy.”

“…….Ah.”

“I remembered thanks to that.”

After telling her this, I finally remembered what was happening in

this mansion in the present.

“More importantly, Krishna-san, Mamiya san is--”

“Ah…….ahh, that’s right.”

Krishna-san immediately returned to a straight face, and spoke.

“I need you to come right away. And Yoishi as well.”

“What happened?”

In response, the former occult site manager gloomily hung her head down.

“He has passed away.”

○

At the entrance to the path, the servants had all gathered, everyone was huddled close together, lost for words.

At the end of the path in the back of the corridor, Ryouichi Mamiya---no, the old man whose name no one knew anymore, had breathed his last.

Together with Yoishi, I slipped past the servants and entered the path. It was the path where that strange guy had been that night. As I tried not to look at the creepy darkness in the back, I crouched down next to the corpse. And, when I looked at his face—I shuddered.

The face did not belong to the old man we had seen so much of over

the past few days. It was not the handsome face of the man we had surmised from the picture of his youth, but that of an old man who was a complete stranger to me.

“….Th, this person is, that proprietor?”

I asked, and Krishna-san nodded in silence.

No, that was indeed the case. The gown he was wearing, the socks, and his gray hair, they all belonged to the owner of this mansion. But his face alone was different. It was not the face of the old man we had met and talked with up until now.

“…What does it mean?”

Krishna-san spoke in a daze.

“When someone dies, their face can change to some extent—but, I’ve never seen the skeletal structure change enough to alter the facial appearance entirely.”

“I wonder if that's so.”

Thereupon, Yoishi turned to look behind her.

“There’s a mirror installed at the back of the door at the entrance to this path. I believe because that old man had an interest in Venetian glass, it was probably elaborately made to pair with the mirror on the front.”

“Eh…….?”

Krishna-san asked in return, and I too cocked my head in puzzlement.

“What do you mean by the mirror on the front?”

“It’s that.”

Yoishi then moved towards the darkness at the end of the path.

There was where I saw the man with one arm, and where Krishna-san saw the woman with long hair.

“H….Hey.”

“It’s alright.”

Yoishi’s voice rang out beyond the darkness even as her figure had already become dim.

“As long as the entrance door is kept open, this will not become a spiritual path.”

Beyond the darkness, a *clink* sounded, and a penlight was turned on. Then it swung symmetrically in two. That’s right, as if to reflect off a mirror.

“…….I see.”

Krishna-san walked ahead, and I, too, followed.

The path came to a dead end around ten meters further ahead, and there was a mirror the full width of the passage.

“If you were to close that entrance, then this path becomes a ‘Corridor of Mirrors’. It becomes a perfect space of opposing mirrors, and it then becomes a perfect spiritual path.”

“Why did Mamiya—no, why did that old man make something like this? Wasn’t he afraid of mirrors?”

“In all likelihood, Ryouichi Mamiya switched places with that friend shortly after the war in the aforementioned cave. There were three warnings: those who continue further from here will 『have no guarantee of their ‘life’』 『have no guarantee of their ‘friend’』 『have no guarantee of their ‘name’』 -- The life meant that one of them would lose their lives. Friend meant the death of their friendship. And the name referred to the fate of the man who must live for the rest of his life in the name of the friend he killed.”

“The proprietor of this mansion…really admired Ryouichi Mamiya.”

With her head cast down, Krishna-san spoke.

“He cared so much about him down to the thickness of his arms.

….Ah, so that's why. He cut off his friend's arm because he was jealous."

Yoishi nodded in agreement,

"However, to bear that darkness alone was far too heavy a burden to bear."

I began to get a bad feeling from her somewhat joyful, peculiar tone of voice.

"This closed corridor, instead of being a space created by the conscience of the man who became Ryouichi Mamiya--"

"Instead of?"

I ended up asking unconsciously but regretted it the moment I saw that the depths of Yoishi's large eyes were beginning to glow with a dark color.

With a chill, the overwhelming sense of helplessness I felt in that hospital room came to the fore once more.

"Aaah, wait, Yoishi, Let's...."

Stop, I was about to say, when I suddenly made eye contact with Krishna-san. The former occult site manager who would always butt in between me and Yoishi and make a scene and panic and say something like, 'You can't, you can't! Don't get involved!', was for some reason, looking at me with a confident look on her face.

--Huh?

My thoughts stopping was the end of my luck.

"That's right— he built this mansion."

"He happily had dinner with both of you."

"He haughtily spoke of fools with you."

Yoishi Mitsurugi was enthralled, her eyes enlivened, and she ended

up mouthing the words in a whisper:

“What clung to the face of this mansion’s owner for a long time was the *ghost of Ryouichi Mamiya*.”

○

In the end, it seemed that the direct bloodline of Ryouichi Mamiya had been cut off.

Later, a DNA test was conducted albeit far too late, and it was established that the man was indeed not Ryouichi Mamiya.

Should the vast wealth and fortune built up using the land and connections of ‘Ryouichi Mamiya’ by the man who was not ‘Ryouichi Mamiya’ be inherited by the family of the real ‘Ryouichi Mamiya’? Or should it be inherited by the descendants of the man who falsified his name as ‘Ryouichi Mamiya’? There seemed to be a big uproar in the Mamiya family over that even now—but I didn’t care about any of that. It was a matter of no consequence to us.

One more important thing happened that day, which I will now narrate.

Krishna-san, Yoishi and I all arrived in the same taxi back to Musashino, Tokyo, but when we got out of the taxi, I recalled something important.

After taking out the luggage, I asked Yoishi, “Give me your phone for a second.”

She made an unwilling expression, so I clarified, “I don’t have any battery left, it’s something important”, and borrowed her unappealing black phone. I then took out that business card from my pocket and dialed the number that was written on there. That was something I had been thinking about all the way in the taxi. It was the answer I had come up with by thinking to the point of madness: Would I really

do that with no regrets?

As Krishna-san and Yoishi looked at me suspiciously—

I heard a woman's voice on the other end of the line after the second ringback tone.

＜Cabinet Information Research Office, how may I help you?＞

"…..Huh?"

I reflexively compared the number displayed on screen to the number on the business card, thinking I had made a mistake. It was not a mistake.

"C, cabinet…..Information research office?"

＜Yes.＞

"N, Nagi-kun….. who are you calling…..?"

Krishna-san started panicking, but *shhhh*, I put my index finger to my lips, and asked.

"I'm Yamada. I'd like to speak with Mitsurugi-san."

＜…And your business is?＞

"I'd like to tell him directly."

＜My apologies, but there is no one here by the name of Mitsurugi.＞

'If that is all, then', as the other party was about to cut the line, I spoke.

"Wait a second. He's supposed to be there, isn't he? He gave me a card with this number on it. That guy who has a face like a Noh mask. He's emotionless, expressionless, with his hair swept back, an incredibly creepy guy. I have something very important to talk to him about. Put me through!"

In response—

＜…….Noh mask…..Creepy…..＞

It felt as if the woman on the other end of the line snickered a laugh.

＜Please wait a moment.＞

I exhaled once, and looked at Yoishi.

She had an anxious expression I had never seen up until now, so I nodded and said, “It’s alright”, and I naturally grabbed her hand. I tightly clasped her soft hand.

＜Hello.＞

Eventually, the voice of that Noh faced man I had met in front of the university that time came from the other end of the line.

“Ah, it’s me, Nagito Yamada.”

＜….I know.＞

Something inside me was dislodged in reaction to his usual expressionless, unsympathetic manner of speaking.

After taking another deep breath, I stated my business in one fell swoop.

“Your daughter is in a terrible place.”

＜……..＞

“She’s in the worst possible place imaginable—no, she’s stepped into a place that’s a level above the worst. Do you know that?”

＜……＞

“No, I’m sure you know a lot, but I’m sure you don’t understand properly. Maybe I'm the only person in the world who fully understands it, so....”

＜….I’m busy. Please get to the point.＞

“Give Yoishi to me.”

<……>

“Even If you refuse, I’ll still take her. I’ll put my life on the line to make her happy.”

At that moment, Yoishi’s hand in the palm of my hand suddenly shuddered.

I clasped her hand once more as if to gently envelop it.

The man on the other end of the line went silent for a while, before eventually grumbling indifferently.

<You’ll end up dead.>

“I don’t care.”

I answered instantly.

I really didn’t care if I died. I came this far after experiencing countless scary life-and-death situations. And I realized. That there were things in this world far more horrifying than death. That there were still horrifying things even after death. If that was so, then wasn’t it all the same? I say that, but it was the conclusion I had come to after walking this far through many deep and grotesque abysses of the world beyond. To lose oneself. To deceive oneself. If you live with a tiny but painful thorn in your side, it will slowly kill your heart. And you would have to face it once more somewhere along the way. But I came this far by running from that. Even though the root of the problem was right there, I ran because I was afraid. I came this far by running from the fusuma, running from ghosts, and running from the emotion called fear. However, right now, there was a problem right here by my side I needed to resolve. The hand in my hand, was actually shaking. Even though it’s unbearably scary, she killed the emotion known as fear, and she was shaking. Even though she was a really good person, even though she has a cute smile, she always has her back hunched over, living life away from the bright light. But that was exactly why she alone understood my disposition. Back then, she stood by my side in the burning dream mansion. And — now it was my turn. It was my turn to confront her and the root of the darkness inside her.

＜--You've been...＞

The man spoke.

＜Possessed by my daughter, haven't you?＞

The man who kept calling her 'it', called her 'daughter' for the first time.

＜…Fine, do as you wish.＞

Saying that, the man cut the line.

In a daze, I looked at the phone display after he cut the line, 'Call time: 2 minutes and 47 seconds' displayed on the screen, when I heard a sob from somewhere.

"I've never—this kind of ridiculous situation---it's the first time."

I turned around to see Krishna-san's shoulders were shaking, and her nose was bright red.

"W-Why are you crying?"

I asked her and at the same time, I realized I was still holding hands with Yoishi, and hurriedly let go.

"It's fine--- just keep it that way."

Krishna-san once again took my hand and the hand of Yoishi, and spoke after firmly joining the two together.

"You have my blessing."

With a smile on her snotty, tear-stained face—

The former manager of 'Ikaigabuchi', whom I respected from the bottom of my heart, loudly declared high up to the sky like a priest.

"You two have my blessing. I'll pray for your happiness."

Case 15: The Disturbing Mansion: Part Two

Everything in this world is like a ghost story. It is full of stories with no known sources or anything. Looking at an incident from the other side shows a different aspect. Each person involved has their own story. And yet we condemn them only from a certain point of view.

It's foolish to do so, but I dare ask—

Are you gods?

That happened three days ago.

I ran into Takako Takamura in front of the main university gate, and she handed me a piece of paper with those incomprehensible words written on it. "What the hell is this?" I asked her, and she cocked her head in reply, "Who knows?"

Incidentally, this girl named Takako Takamura, who stood with her hair was dancing in the wind and her tall body leaning to one side, was the half-sister of 'Ayana Takamura', a Koumei institute student who had mysteriously disappeared several years prior.

A super-extreme denpa(net slang referring to those who repeat occult-like words and actions without regard for their surroundings) who tried to incarnate with malicious intent by spreading taboo words all over the school. To me who knew about her in detail, Takako Takamura who had been called a 'vessel' by her half-sister and who bore a life-like resemblance to her despite only sharing half

their blood, was a little creepy.

『It was there beside my pillow when I woke up this morning.』

『Huh?』

『I was the one who probably doth write it.』

『Doth write it?』

『And, they were probably the words doth by my sister.』

『Did…your way of speaking become abnormal?』

I asked her that, and in response, Takako Takamura distorted her well-shaped facial features into a grin.

『I've recently become addicted to classic literature. In summary, I think my sister is warning you of danger.』

『Danger?』

『I think something bad will happen to you from now on.』

『W…wait a second.』

『You'll be forced to make the final choice very soon, and on top of that, you'll be buried alive in the mountains.』

○

--The final choice? Buried alive?

At the time I thought, are you kidding me? She went ahead and said

something creepy again, but I let it slide.

Now that I think of it, Takako Takamura's words turned out to be completely true.

That's right, now--- I was in complete darkness, unable to move my arms or legs.

"……..Ptch……..Hey, are you alive?"

I chocked out the dust I had inhaled and called out, and a familiar voice rang out beyond the darkness.

"….What…is this place? Hell? Kokytos….?"

"Ahhh, you're alive. Thank goodness. ….Ummm, this isn't hell, we're in the mountains. We got buried in a lot of collapsed timber--"

I spoke that far, when an intense pain ran down my right leg.

It was in the area around my right knee. And, ahead of that--- I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't even tell if I still had legs given that I couldn't move my body. Even though my head already understood it, but my right leg was continuing to send signals of throbbing pain, as if to say, "It's an emergency". It hurt, and it was dark, I suddenly felt scared and was on the verge of panicking.

However, I took a deep breath and told myself, "Calm down".

…How long, have we been here since then? In the darkness, I gently turned the watch on my left arm in the direction of my face while trying not to hurt my hand on the broken wood. Similarly, I slowly moved my right arm, and somehow managed to turn on the light of my watch.

Monday, 16 April 2012, 19:17.

…Ah, it'll be almost a full day soon. Had I been in this condition for almost twenty-four hours? The moment I realized this, I remembered how intensely parched my throat was. A stinging pain stuck to the back of my throat. Water, water….isn't there water somewhere?

“….I can’t move my body.”

At that moment, I heard her voice beyond the darkness.

“Yeah…my leg is trapped, and I can’t move either.”

“Why did something like this happen?”

“Why? --- You don’t remember anything?”

“I remember… coming here with you.”

“Can you stop being so informal. It’s like we’re married.”

I couldn't help but laugh as we ended up doing the usual back and forth with no regard for the location.

And, laughing calmed my heart down a little. I was able to ask, “You’re not injured, are you?”

“Probably not.”

“That’s good.”

-- I was about to say that my legs were in a bit of bad shape, but I stopped myself. There was no use in saying it, and she might get a little worried.

“Well, there’s nothing to do but wait. I’m sure help will come soon.”

“…When?”

“…How should I know? It’ll be here soon.”

“……..”

“……..”

But, I was at a loss for words when I realized that help would not come anytime soon.

My surroundings fell dead silent.

Without even the cries of mountain birds, it felt as if the world had ended.

“It’s emotionally taxing if it stays like this.”

I spoke, trying to rouse my dark, crushing heart.

“Let’s do something else…right, don’t you have some riddles in mind?”

After a moment's silence, she spoke.

“If it’s interesting stories you want to hear, then.”

“Oh, sure.”

I answered simply, when suddenly, I shuddered.

The things she thought of as ‘interesting’ were a little different than what one would ordinarily think of as interesting.

“….Never mind! It’s fine, don’t tell me. I can’t even run away if I listen to a scary story in this situation.”

I said that, but she had already begun to slowly narrate in a whisper.

“Why did ‘Gandame’ smile, I wonder?”

“Hey, stop it.”

“Being smiled at means you die— the lineage of mountain goddess ghost stories is found all over Japan, but why is smiling linked with death I wonder?”

“I told you! We’re in the middle of the mountain where that ‘Gandame’ is said to appear, so stop it. If a smiling woman with cloudy eyes appears in the darkness, I can’t run away even if I wanted to!”

I retorted sharply, and she fell silent.

My surroundings returned to dark silence once more, and somewhere beyond the dark mountains, I heard a crunching sound.

Was It an animal—or a monster from the mountain?

I didn't know, but either one was fine, as long as it could me forget the pain in my right leg. As if to shake off the stinging pain, I thought back. Everything that led us here. Everything that led us to this point, to the dark abyss we passed through.

That's right—that day, Friday the 13th of April.

I was in a hurry.

I had regained recognition of Yoishi Mitsurugi once more, and was told by Krishna-san.

『If you've decided to walk together with Yoishi, then go and meet Takita-san.』

I had no idea what was going on, but as soon as I finished my lectures, I ran out of the university. However, I ran into Takako Takamura at the front fate, and was given a strange message or prophecy, but I made light of it and ran off to the station.

It was all to uncover the truth behind the darkness that enveloped the girl known as Yoishi Mitsurugi.

○

"Hey, Sako! Come out!"

The door to Sako Takita's antique store 'Kouroudou'(Bone Tower Shrine) in Sotokanda, Tokyo, was locked.

I peeked in through a gap in the dark curtains behind the frosted glass, but as usual, objects I didn't really understand were all crammed in a line. A headless Buddhist statue, a mummified Kappa, and a hanging scroll covered in what appeared to be blood stains. Beyond those suspicious items that he considered merchandise, I

raised my voice towards the inner parlor.

“Hey, Sako! Are you asleep?!”

I wonder how long I kept knocking on the door and calling out to him like that.

“Excuse me.”

Suddenly, I was called out to from behind and looked back to see a short old woman dressed in a kimono that was a light cherry color with a slight grayish tinge.

Although her back was rounded to a large degree, she was a small and cute old woman. Come to think if it, my deceased grandma was short as well. As I recalled those kinds of things, I bowed down to greet the old woman who looked up at me with an elegant face.

“Ah, sorry for being so noisy.”

In response, the old woman gave me a friendly grin and asked, “Do you have some business with the owner of that shop?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“That nice man who’s always wearing an indigo dyed kimono.”

“It’s doubtful whether he’s nice or not, but he is indeed always wearing a navy-blue kimono.”

“We’re always gossiping about whether he is still single.”

Saying that, the old woman giggled like a maiden.

“Um, that’s fine….but, do you know where he is now? I have some urgent business with him.”

“Isn’t it the 13th today?”

“…Yes?”

“That person goes to Myoujin-san on the 13th of each month.”

“Myoujin-san?”

“It’s Kanda Inari Gongen-sama.”

“…Ah.”

Come to think of it, Sako’s day job was being the head priest of a shrine in Aomori— I think it was called ‘so-and-so Inari Shrine’.

“Myoujin-san is just ahead up the stairs from there.”

“Thank you so much.”

After thanking her, I broke into a run.

I climbed the long, narrow stairs, slipped through a narrow alley, and soon saw several red nobori[8].

There were souvenir shops lined on the path to the shrine, and even though it was a weekday afternoon, there were still quite a few people. As a country boy who loved festivals, I ended up getting excited just by visiting these kinds of places.

I read the stone monument in a touristy mood, Kanda Myoujin was a shrine dedicate to Daikoku, the god of wealth, Ebisu the god of fishing and commerce, and ‘Taira No Masakado’, who was popular among us occult maniacs because of certain reasons.

“Hmmm.”

I looked up at the main shrine once more.

I had passed it once or twice before, but to tell the truth, it was my first time stepping foot inside.

“…Wait, no, no, I don't have time for this.”

Right away, I searched around the area for Sako. However, there was no sign of the man in the navy-blue kimono anywhere around the main shrine, or in any tea house or souvenir store. Having no choice, I went around the main shrine to look around the subordinate shrines. As I walked along, stepping on the gravel under the sunlight

that filtered through the trees, I found that there were various subordinate shrines at the back of the main shrine. I was happy to see that each shrine was neatly swept with bamboo brooms, and was being properly looked after. It made me sad just seeing small shrines in disrepair—when, I spotted a familiar man in a kimono in front of one of the small shrines.

"—Sako?"

I called out to him, but Sako Takita remained seated directly on the ground in a daze with his back turned towards me.

I quietly approached his side and peeked at him from the front. And — noticed something. There were several empty sake bottles near his knees.

"Of all the…are you drunk?"

"…Hngh."

Sako turned around at last, and greeted me, 'Yoo'.

His complexion, which was normally pale, had a slight red tinge to it.

"Yo? really?"

"Haha…umm, you are—of course I remember. Ehhh, your name, it was that."

"It's Nagito Yamada. Come on, get up. You'll get reported if you drink in a place like this."

"…Erm, it's alright, the chief priest here is an acquaintance."

Sako Takita looked like a complete bum as he foolishly laughed. I tried to make him stand up, but his legs were unsteady having drunk so much, and on top of that he had no desire to stand up himself, so things didn't go the way I wanted. Suddenly feeling foolish, I let go of his arm around mine.

He sloppily toppled on the gravel with his arms and legs outstretched.

“….Oooh. How cruel, what are you doing?”

“I just remembered what you did and let my anger take care of the rest. You had the nerve to make Yoishi imperceptible to me, didn’t you?”

I returned to the point of discussion.

“It’s already been undone. That’s why you came to me, right?”

Sako chuckled and started to laugh.

“I told her that it was merely a stopgap solution. You were out of control back then to the point where even Kurimoto-kun couldn’t handle. Please don’t hold it against her.”

“Yeah yeah, Krishna-san already gave me a rough rundown on what happened. That I was delirious and went berserk at the hospital. That was my fault--- but, there was no reason to make me unable to see her, was there? Or rather, why did I do that when I saw Yoishi…? Do you know why?”

In response, Sako fell silent.

He continued to look at midair in a daze with the occasional *hiccup*.

I continued to wait for him, but there was no sign that Sako would start talking, so I looked around to make sure no one was around. — and I, too, sat cross-legged on the spot.

“In the first place, this subordinate shrine is the home of some deity, isn't it? Why are you drinking at a place like this?”

“…Hm.”

Sako slowly looked up towards the shrine right in front of him, and grinned broadly.

“Today is the monthly anniversary of her death.[9]”

“Anniversary? Whose?”

“My mother's.”

“….. Eh?”

Thereafter, I looked at the signpost next to the entrance of the supplementary shrine. On it was inscribed, ‘Ukanomitama (god of rice), and Suehiroinari (god of harvests, wealth, fertility) as well.

“My mother you see, was kind, courteous, and beautiful. Well, I can’t deny that I might be glorifying her because of her early passing. But, you understand, right? A mother who is the personification of affection is clearly different from a father. A unique existence to all children that shared her flesh and blood.”

“Well, yeah.”

I nodded, and Sako stayed silent for a while.

After staring vacantly at empty space as if chasing something invisible—

“My mother, she killed herself you see.”

“……”

“Well, that’s what the world thinks.”

“…What the world thinks?”

“Right. She was thought to have severed her own life, but in reality… she was murdered.”

After that, Sako laughed: heh, heh, heh—he then picked up one of the sake bottles that had been lying around and brought it to his mouth. But it seemed its contents were already empty, so he carelessly threw it away.

“You know, you’re not supposed to say those kinds of things even if you’re drunk.”

“…Drunk? Yes, I might be drunk, but I only speak the truth.”

Then Sako gazed at me in a stance where he used his knees to support his arms,

“It happened before my very eyes—And, I could do nothing at all. There was no point in asking people about it, and there was no point in talking about it. It’s not something people should know about, and it’s definitely not a story that should be readily known by an ordinary person. But still, all stories are connected. In the end, it feels like all karma bounces from one place to the next. Now then—will you hear that kind of story?”

Suddenly—

The words that have been said countless times in countless situations came back to me.

A story that should not be heard. A story people should not know.

If you found out, you would become involved and entangled in them —a story woven with Kotodama.

If it had been me up until now, I might have shaken my head and said, “I’ll pass.”

However—

“That karma or whatever, is it connected to her—to Yoishi Mitsurugi?”

I asked.

“If it’s a story that has some power to clear away the darkness inside her….then let me hear it.”

I said that, and the smallest—the truly faintest of smiles appeared on Sako’s face.

And then, he looked at me with an expression I had never seen before, an expression most transparent, and pure.

“It happened…back when I was still in high school.”

“I saw a monster—in broad daylight.”

Monsters—now then, what is a monster?

Do they spit fire? Do they devour humans? Do they possess supernatural powers which ordinary humans can’t fight against? Well, those kinds of definitions vary from person to person, but there’s one thing that can be said with certainty. Once you encounter them, you can't escape their influence for the rest of your life —that exactly is what I believe monsters are.

With that meaning in mind, what I encountered could be called a monster.

It happened on a day when the sun was still high in the sky, and yet the moon’s pale light also loomed. Thinking back on it now, bad things have usually happened on days like that. Well although, I can only speak of my own life. On that day, I quickly left after my high school classes had ended, just like any other day. I was never the type of person to get along with my classmates, nor was I the type to rejoice in the springtime of youth by engaging in sweaty club activities. High school life to me was really nothing more than just a means to kill time. In other words, I was a gloomy high school student, the type that would go to a coffee shop after leaving school in violation of school regulations, and would set up camp at a seat in the back to read Chekhov, Ango and so on. I’ll explain later, but I had circumstances which made me not want to return home right away. What you might find laughable is that I had been given an unconditional command to return home as late as possible.

So, that day as well, I headed to the cafe named ‘Windmill’ with a book in my hand which I had almost finished reading -- but on that

day alone, there was a noisy customer who had taken up camp at the seat at the back where I always sat. I, on the other hand, was the type who was unable to concentrate on books unless my surroundings were quiet. So, having no choice, I headed to the park.

Ahh, that's right—my house at the time was not in Aomori where I currently reside. I was originally born in Kobe, moved to Kyoto afterward, and was living in Fukuoka at the time. The reason why was because my father was involved in the trading business, but it wasn't a good thing for a child to move around so often in their childhood. Even now, I believe that was the reason I became shy and had problems making friends--- but I digress. Anyway, I lived in the east of Fukuoka. Well, you might know of it being an occult lover and all, but it was famous for the Jizo statue where the Kappas are sealed. [10]

There was a vast, lush green place known as the T-park.

I headed there, but it wasn't even 4 PM yet. There were a lot of mothers with their children. No matter how many times I looked around, I couldn't find an empty bench anywhere. I walked all the way to the back of the park and found an empty bench at last, where I sat down, but I had lost all motivation to read, probably because it had taken me so long to get there. For a while, I merely sat there in a daze.

Before I knew it, I was biting my nails.

Well, I guess you could call it a psychological state you often see in high schoolers in puberty. I was strangely irritated. Perhaps it was because the plans I had made for the day didn't go well, or perhaps it was the peaceful, warm scenery which made it appear as if time had stopped— I continued to sit on the old bench, and continued to chew my nails without changing places.

It was at that moment.

A toddler shakily walked toward me.

A boy—probably, I think it was a boy. I don't remember exactly. An innocent-looking toddler approached me with some kind of toy in

hand. He was a friendly child. He already trusted completely in someone like me. I, who was a stranger from who knows where, a high schooler with dark eyes and with a book like ‘Discourse on decadence’ in hand. He had a friendly grin on his face as he offered me the toy. I ignored that and merely looked around in dismay. I wondered where the mother went, taking her eyes off a child this young. However, there was no sign of a mother-like figure close by. That child sidled up to me alone. He held out his precious favorite toy to me, with a “Yes”. For a moment, I wondered if I was even pitied by such a young child, but that wasn’t the case. In all likelihood, the child was living a life filled with love. That must be why he didn’t even think of the possibility that some humans can be evil.

When I realized that, something like a thin mist rose somewhere in my heart.

--What would happen if a dark malice were unleashed upon this pure being?

I was surprised at myself for thinking something like that. I didn't think I was capable of such sadistic thoughts. And, it was an irresistibly bewitching idea. There was a defenseless creature in front of me; There was no one around. It was just me, him and the toy. For the time being, I picked up the toy the boy had placed at my feet and put it in my pocket. Eventually, that child came to pick up the toy that he had placed at my feet and stopped moving. He started looking around, behind my legs, as if searching for the toy, then looked up at me. I merely grinned at him. The child continued to search for the toy after that, but I couldn’t help but feel an irresistible rush of pleasure rising up my spine. I was getting an almost nauseating pleasure from the anxiety that was enveloping his tiny back.

What kind of face would he make if I were to pluck the toy’s head and throw it away? The plastic doll of some transforming hero. Would he start crying? What would happen if this pure creature were to be showered with malice?

As he had his back turned to me, I secretly took out the toy. I dangled it towards his back. He was anxiously digging up the sandpits close by. As if he thought he might have buried it somewhere. I put my

hand on the doll's neck. I put a little power and tried to twist its neck, when—

I finally noticed that gaze.

With a start, I looked diagonally to my right, to see a woman with a kind expression. She was sitting on a bench covered by ivy in the shade, staring at me and the child. In an instant, I understood that she was the mother of the child.

Sweat slowly formed on my hands, and I removed my hand from the doll's neck.

--What was it? How long had she been there? Did this woman see everything I had done?

My heart was pounding violently, as if it was about to burst from my mouth.

Eventually, I called out "Boy", in a shaky voice and handed the toy back to him. The boy's face immediately lit up, and he took the toy in hand. And at the same time, he spotted his mother, and happily ran towards her. The mother slightly bowed to me and left, holding hands with the child.

--There was no way a mother would take her eyes off her young child.

I chided myself for my foolishness after all that time, but it was already too late.

It felt as if the daytime moon was smirking down at me, and I quickly left that park.

I was embarrassed that the mother had seen through me. It was most fortunate that I managed to notice her at the last moment and hadn't plucked the doll's head off. Even though it was a provincial city, there was more regional unity there than in a place like Tokyo. I was patting myself on the chest, thinking that if I had done that, I might not be able to live in this city anymore.

However, as I left the park, I realized my heart continued to throb

violently.

Yes— I was still excited.

I was excited at the thought of trampling that which was pure.

It was as if I had become something other than myself—no, as if the real me that kept itself hidden in my heart somewhere had revealed itself. It was also a sense of freedom at being my true self. The irritating feeling I had just thirty minutes ago was no longer there.

I wonder if that was the reason why.

Even though it was not yet time to go back home—I ended up getting ready to return home.

Now then, why didn’t I return home straight away after school?

It’s about time I explained that. What? It’s not something big. In short, it was because my mother's lover was at home. He was ostensibly the man my mother was learning to paint from. I told you my father was involved in the trading business, so he was often away from home. Sometimes he didn’t come home for weeks. And when he did come home, he would do so late at night. When my father was home, my mother was very diligent and devoted to him. She bathed him, cooked for him, and listened to his stories with a round of laughter. To an outsider, she must have looked like the ideal, wise housewife. And that's what I always thought too.

However, it was around the time I entered middle school. My mother said that she wanted to learn how to draw. My father agreed. My mother had a small interest in oil painting in her student days, and my father might have felt guilty for being away from home so often. And so, the one who eventually came was that man. I was able to hate him with just one glance. He must have been five or so years younger than my mother, but —ah, I just can't remember his face no

matter what. I don't know why, but he always looked like he was wearing a fox's face. Not literally a fox's face, but truly a fox mask. It didn't look like that to the people around me including my mother, probably because my strong rejection against that man made me feel that way. The fox masked man was polite, eloquent and graceful in his speech, and he often gave me gifts. But to me, it looked like a red tongue peeking out of a mouth with the corners of his mouth slit from ear to ear. My mother and the man were silently painting in her room. And before long I was told, "Play outside on the day sensei comes", And I was made to realize that I was not allowed to stay at home.

That must have been like ink that dropped on the surface of water that was my family. When that man started coming in and out of my house, my family was stained with an indelible stain. My father not being home became the norm, and I too had come to think that I shouldn't stay at home—and above all, the man started visiting my house not just once a week, but with one thing or another, he started visiting every day.

Every day.

In the afternoon.

A man who was not a member of our family would definitely be there.

I thought my family had been taken over by something suspicious.

My father died soon afterward.

He returned to Japan after going to Guangzhou for work and was on his way home when we lost contact with him, and he was found at Matsuyama harbor, Shikoku. It seems he was found floating in the sea by a couple on a date. Why did he go to Matsuyama from Fukuoka? Was it an accident, a suicide, or did he get involved in some trouble? We had no idea. The police visited my mother almost every day, but it appeared they eventually stopped investigating it as a murder case. That was because the body of another woman was found on the harbor. That woman was an office worker in my father's company. It seemed she had been going out with my father. The

police tried to conclude the case by saying it was a double suicide spurred on by a lovers talk.

However, I can say it with almost complete certainty.

That my father was murdered.

And the culprit was that fox masked man.

After that, for the next three years of high school—a strange situation developed in which I, lived together with my mother and that fox masked man.

I stopped coming home.

I only returned home to sleep and spent the rest of the day killing time outside.

However, on that day—

On the day I felt delight in aiming malice towards a child.

I decided to return home after a long time while the sun was still high up in the sky.

I unlocked the door, entered inside, declared that I was home, and entered the tatami room.

The scene I saw there would perhaps never be erased from my memory for as long as I live.

On the tatami mats was my mother, naked and bound. The rope painfully bit into her flesh, but my mother sobbed with joy. Next to her was the fox masked man. He merely sat there quietly on his knees, staring motionlessly at my mother.

The man slowly turned towards me, who stood dumbfounded at the entrance of the tatami room.

The white, fox masked man with the corners of his mouth slit from ear to ear, sneered to me.

How long—

Just how long did I stand there, motionless?

How much time did it take for me to realize what was happening in the tatami room?

Before I realized, I was sneering as well.

And, I realized at last.

The man was ‘malice’. He was the ‘malice’ inside me.

I don’t recall the specifics of what happened after that.

All I remember is that I staggered out of the house, and continued around wandering the city—and when I came to, I was in Hakata station.

There, I bought a train ticket to the furthest place possible.

When I reached Aomori station, what I saw on the news was that my house had burned down completely, and that the corpse of a naked woman had been discovered inside. I didn’t even think about had happened. I had become numb to all emotions. I didn't know why I was in Aomori. Nor did I know what I should do from here. I was overwhelmed by the scenery of Tohoku that I was seeing for the first time, and collapsed in front of the station.

When I came to, I found myself riding in the car of a strange gray-haired man. The old man merely called himself the ‘Chief priest’. I had run out of money and had not eaten anything, so he said to me.

『You’re possessed by a terrible ghost.』

『It’s a very powerful ghost, and you might not be able to do anything about it yourself.』

『You may run out of strength midway through and die, but if left alone, you’ll die anyway.』

『I’m sure your stomach must be empty, but it would be better if you

didn’t eat anything. Let’s begin right away.』

After that, I was taken to a shrine somewhere deep in the mountains, and made to change into a white kimono. I don’t know how much time passed after that. I was abandoned in a room that was like a dungeon, and was subjected to ritual prayer every day. There was nothing left for me to vomit, yet the intense feeling of wanting to throw up welled up inside me over and over again. Ahh-- Thinking back on it now, I had never been in so much pain. I would fall backwards and repeatedly slam my body against the hard floor. Having not even been given enough food for excrement, I realized at the depths of what little consciousness that remained that I was going to die. I felt the end of my life was right at hand. At that moment, I felt something leave my thin, frayed consciousness. It cried out loud in a high, frustrated whine, and disappeared as if it melted away.

『It’s over.』

At last, I heard the old man's voice near me.

I saw a light beyond my hazy vision.

Tears spilled from my eyes seeing the beauty of the grass and trees illuminated by the sun.

『You’re saved. However, you won't be able to lead a normal life from now on.』

The old man spoke as I greedily devoured the rice gruel I was eating after several days.

『If you don't retighten your body that an oversized ghost passed through every day, you'll quickly end up becoming an abode for countless ghosts.』

The old man didn't have to tell me that, I knew that it was just a short distance away.

I knew that it would quietly continue to stare at me from somewhere —until I died.

『Abandon everything, and spend the rest of your life here.』

That place was called ‘Okitachi Inari Shrine’—

I would later find out that it was a shrine that guarded one of the veins of this island country, that defended against the northern demon gate.[11]

After that, I became a disciple of that old man, and began to study Shintoism. It was a little different, however, and in no way what you would generally define as ‘modern Shintoism’, it was a severe unrelenting study. Well, that's a long story, so I’ll spare you the details, but I was forced to abandon my name, my family name, my past, and completed my training to completely become ‘nothing’ all at once. I had to rearrange and fix the air ducts in my spine, and recompose all of my cells properly. I assimilated all of my thoughts with nature, and abandoned myself. I repeated that every day, every hour, every minute. I continued to adjust it as I ate, as I slept. I might have told you once before, but—if you’re not a great masochist, then it would have been a maddening day-to-day existence.

My master must not have thought I would be able to bear it all. Somewhere along the way, he probably concluded that I would run off some day and self-destruct by becoming a nest for the ghosts that would penetrate me through my turbulent air ducts. However, I somehow managed to hold my ground. I endured it all.

Say, you.

Why… do you think that was?

A few years after that, I asked my master.

About why ‘that’ had happened.

By ‘that’, I had meant ‘that thing’ which had destroyed me and my family, and I tried asking about it indifferently.

『No one really knows.』

My master answered.

『It was called ‘Nine tails’ in Nara period literature, and in the Edo period, it was referred to as the ‘everlasting night stone’—however, in all likelihood, it must have been present inside humans of every era. Yes, it is something that continues to move from person to person.』

『Is that so?』

I kept an expression as if I wasn't interested anymore, but I engraved that name deep at the back of my mind.

With a soft smile, I grit my teeth so hard they might have bled, and recalled my mother’s face from that day.

It possesses people.

It amplifies people’s negative emotions and manipulates them from the inside without them even knowing.

It makes people believe that people don’t deserve to exist, it makes them destroy their surroundings, and themselves.

The first one in my family who it possessed was me.

My once warm family, had before I realized, turned into a reflection of what I considered to be the worst possible family.

As it made me believe that I was killing time outside, it toyed with my mother as it pleased on a daily basis.

It casually made my father realize this abnormal relationship, destroyed his heart, and drove him to his death.

--Unforgivable, unforgivable.

I could not forgive the wandering ghost known as the ‘everlasting night stone’, but above all, I could not forgive myself.

However, my own punishment would be held off until the very end.

Before that, I had to annihilate it. For that reason, I—

Would be as brave as Amitabha Tathagata, who stayed at the left of Amitabha Tathagata.

Would be as wise as Gabrielle, who stayed at the left of God's throne.

And—I would transform into the sword that cut down demons, like Futsunushi[12], who stayed at the left of Okuninushi[13].

That's right, I decided to become a demon that would devour demons.

That was why I erased all emotions, and was able to endure everything.

With the deity Futsunushi, enshrined at Okitachi Inari Shrine as my guardian deity, I received the surname of my master.

And that is how from that day forth… Nagito Yamada-kun, I took the name of Sako Takita.[14]

○

"….Perhaps because of that you see. I feel as if my face is getting thinner like a fox each year."

After his long, long, story had finished—

Sako Takita gave a thin smile as if something possessing him had fallen off.

"I feel as if my long journey will finally come to an end when I'm able to make it feel the concept of death."

I had no idea how to answer, and had my head cast down there as if I were merely seeing a dream.

The reason why Sako became Sako—the monster that possessed people moving from person to person.

Amplifying the negative emotions in people, wasn't that the crazy system Ayana Takamura tried to create through the taboo words?

However, that meant that such a thing already existed in this world?

The Nine tails in the Nara period and the everlasting night stone in the Edo period—Wait, 'Everlasting night stone'?

"…Hey, Sako."

I raised my head in a daze and asked.

"How do you write the words for 'Everlasting night stone'?[15]"

In response, Sako twisted the edges of his mouth into a smile.

"Oh, you noticed, did you…?"

In an instant, it looked as if the mouth of that pale, bloodless face, was slit from ear to ear.

"Right, it's written as 'Everlasting night stone'(常夜石). I found it at last recently. The place it currently lurks—or rather, the person."

"…Hey, it can't be."

"That's right—In Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun."

"The monster I'm chasing appears as a dark glow in her eyes when she faces the paranormal, and at times she tries to remove by vomiting."

"Ah…."

“The ‘everlasting night stone’ possesses person to person and destroys their surroundings. In all likelihood, that has continued for a thousand years and is probably as natural to it as eating something. But you see, for the past few decades, it has been observed to follow a certain rule. The ‘everlasting night stone’, which used to possess and destroy at random, has often come to stay in one person. My master and I often wondered and researched into what that meant. And we arrived at one possibility. Yes--- it had the audacity as a monster, to try and incarnate itself. It shamelessly began to desire a flesh and blood body. And that too, an exceedingly beautiful body with a spiritual disposition. Thereupon, about ten years ago—it fell in love at first sight with a young girl.”

“You…”

I asked as if to spit out something bitter.

“How long have you known about it? Did you know it from the moment you appeared before us?”

“Not at all.”

Sako gave a thin smile. “The first time I met you—was in that cramped apartment. You were in a deep sleep and wouldn't wake up. Yoishi-kun called Kurimoto-kun, and Kurimoto-kun called me for help. When I came to visit, I saw that the thread of your soul was at its limits, at the point of being cut off. Its whereabouts were deep in the depths of your psyche-- yes, the source of your fear, the dream mansion. I used clairvoyance to see that you were in the living room of the mansion. You were afraid of the fusuma in the living room, and moreover, that your mother was inside. To tell you the truth, I gave up right away because I thought it was impossible. To begin with, it was impossible for a stranger to solve an incident in the deepest recesses of the mind which involved the mother, who shared flesh and blood. But that time, she said it. By she I mean Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun, whose name I did not know at the time, she spoke with a strange glimmer in her eyes, 『Let me go inside this person』.”

“……..”

“I suddenly felt as if I had met this girl somewhere before. But well, as you know, I’m quite terrible at remembering people. ‘Oh fine’, I asked as I rubbed my chin. 『What do you mean by inside?』 In response the girl spoke, 『Let me synchronize with him. You should be able to do it』. Her face really made me believe that she was acting out of puberty--and in some way enjoying herself—but this is what was truly the case you see: she seemed genuinely worried that you were danger. It was true that I, as a medium could act as a catalyst that could match the brain waves of a sleeping person with those of a person who was awake. And it was exactly how the girl said it would be: to return a person lost at the depths a dream required someone to synchronize with them and pull them out. But well, I did warn her how dangerous it would be. 『Is it all right? The possibility that you might not return is fairly high』. She merely nodded her head with a strong resolve. There was barely any hesitancy in that, and because the situation urgently demanded it, I had no choice but to accept. And then-- after I had sent her inside you, I suddenly felt a terrible sweat run down my back. I performed the ritual even as I was perplexed as to the reason why that was, but at long last I realized. It was the eyes of the young girl I had seen just now. The eyes of the beautiful high school girl who had asked to synchronize with another person's dream-- Or rather, it was something dark that flickered in its depths. I was aghast, it couldn't be. Could it be that right now, I was facing the arch nemesis for whom I had searched for many long years? The blood in my body froze over as I realized this. I immediately thought I would seal it right there and then. Even Kurimoto-kun wouldn't realize if I did it then. Because I had already made the seals that sent Yoishi-kun into you. I could kill it right there in the vessel that you were. It would have been unfair to you, but I would use your consciousness to make it able to feel the concept of ‘death’. Although it would kill you as well. My fingers were already about to make a move at that time. But-- but you see.”

“…But?”

“At that moment, I suddenly ended up seeing it you see. I saw her– I saw Yoishi-kun’s hand enveloping yours as if connected.”

……..

“I changed my mind at the very last moment. I couldn't for the life of me believe that the way those hands were connected was a manifestation of malice. And, a different thought emerged. Could it be that the ‘nine tails’, the ‘everlasting night stone’, did not yet have complete control over this young girl? That because of some reason, it had not completely consumed her heart. –No, was such a thing even possible? The ‘everlasting night stone’ I had known of was an existence that was the complete antithesis of the word ‘fool’. It is terrifyingly intelligent; all of its actions are calculated and borne purely from malice. I hesitated as to whether this act too might merely be an insurance policy to stop me. As long as I held naïve notions, I would never be able to win against it. If I were to let this once in a lifetime chance slip away, I might have a chance to seal it ever again--I hesitated, and hesitated.....”

Thereupon, Sako looked at me.

“As I hesitated, you eventually ended waking up.”

“……..Ah.”

“And you who awoke called her Yoishi. Ahh, it was true after all, and darkness took over my vision. I was about to faint on the spot, realizing how foolish I was. But this time, it was Yoishi-kun who did not open her eyes. And what did you say to me, who was blaming myself to death? 『Return me to that dream』. I was astounded, and at the same time, extremely agitated. You might not believe it, but I do get agitated. And you see, I suddenly felt somewhat relieved.”

“….Relieved?”

“Well, please think about it. If she truly was the ‘everlasting night stone’, would she have tried to save a total stranger from a dream from which she could not return? Would she try and end her life, after having lived for what might potentially be thousands of years? And, her actions were connected to your following actions. They had now given birth to a fool who was willing to die to save others. Such a thing is not at all in accordance with the principles governing the ‘everlasting night stone’s’ conduct.”

“……”

“Later on, I did a thorough investigation of Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun’s background, and of all things, realized that I had already met her ten years and eight months in the past.”

Sako’s face contorted in an unusually somber manner.

“And it was only then…that I finally remembered that I happened to be present there when she became ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’.”

“Ten years and eight months ago….? Did something happen to her back then?”

When—

I heard footsteps treading on gravel behind me, and when I turned around, I saw a group of three old women who looked like tourists; They looked suspiciously at the both of us with the bottles of sake we had at our feet in the middle of the day in the subordinate shrine. I bowed lightly and said, “We’ll be going back soon, so please ignore us.”

After that, I turned to face Sako once more.

And I asked him.

“Say—isn’t Yoishi Mitsurugi her real name? Why did she lose the emotion of ’fear’?”

“What will you do after learning that? There are things in this world people shouldn’t know.”

Those words—

They made me recall the face of my deceased grandmother once more. I was often told the very same words by my grandmother. My grandmother would always be kind to me no matter what kind of mischief I pulled, but would speak those words alone with a face so grim it would frighten me when I was little.

However, I apologized to my grandmother’s phantom—and shook it off as hard as I could.

“I’ll be the one to decide if it’s a story I shouldn’t know.”

“……”

“It's not up to you or anyone else to decide that. She and I are war comrades. I’ve decided that I’ll save her. Her life is already more important to me than mine.”

In response—

“….Hoho.”

Sako unexpectedly raised a dry laugh.

“….Ahaha---is that right, hahahaha… So that’s how it is, huh….? War comrades…. War comrades. With that, the last mystery is finally solved.”

He was laughing, but his face looked like it was crying to me.

“Hey, Sako.”

“No, my apologies--- but now that the mystery is solved, it’s not my place to tell you.”

“….What the hell?”

“I was obliged to talk about my own story, but from here on out, it’s her story. And if she is your war comrade— then you should hear it from her own mouth.”

Sako had a satisfied grin on his face, when—

A *brrrrrr* sounded from the back pocket of my jeans, my phone was vibrating.

“Ah, sorry.”

I answered the phone, it was from Yukihito Kurimoto-kun.

“Yo, Yukihito-kun. I’m kind of in the middle of something right--”

《Nagito-san, are you with nee-san right now?》

“…Krishna-san? No…”

《I got a call from my mother…. Just now, she found a note in nee-san’s room that said, 『I’m sorry』. She thought nee-san might have left home early this morning, but she might have been missing since last night….》

“Missing, you say…?”

I unconsciously shifted my phone to the other ear, when I heard Sako clicking his tongue, “Tsk”.

As I looked at Sako with one eye, I talked to Yukihito-kun who was unusually perturbed.

“Listen to me, first of all you need to calm down. Take a deep breath, and then try and remember if Krishna-san was acting strange somehow.”

《Come to think of it.》

Yukihito-kun spoke after taking a deep breath.

《After she went to help sort out Karasu-san’s belongings last night, Nee-san looked unwell.》

“Karasu-san’s belongings?”

For the time being, I told Yukihito-kun, “We’ll also try and look for her”, and hung up the phone, when Sako muttered.

“It might have been my mistake.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve forgotten to adjust her spine for a while now.”

“You…said that before as well, but is Krishna-san’s spine really that bad?”

“It’s not bad body structure-wise. But, I’ll say it once more, the spine is the air duct. Once an oversized ghost passes through it, the spine

will end up becoming wobbly and distorted."

His words made me shudder.

"An oversized…Ah, by the ghost that passed through, you mean….Hey, could it be?"

That's right, Sako nodded.

"I don't know what kind of shape Ayana Takamura appeared to you in, but to me, she's so large that I can feel her presence everywhere. Figuratively speaking, she now blends into the entirety of this large blue sky."

"….S-sky?"

"Anyway, since then, Kurimoto-kun's body has ended up becoming a body that accepts all kinds of ghosts. It was my responsibility to close that at regular intervals."

"Then—then, let's go look for her right away."

I stood up, when Sako shook his head, "No."

"The one you're in a race against time for is not Kurimoto-kun."

He then took out a paper from his pocket, quickly jotted down something on it, and handed it to me together with an old key.

"I'll take care of Kurimoto-kun. Please complete Yoishi-kun's story."

"W, what is this?"

"It's the address and key of a certain 'mansion', one that is currently being managed by the government--- it might turn out to be a key to hell."

Sako spoke not with his usual jesting tone, but rather, with a serious expression.

"At that address, there is a building that was once called 'The Hanging Mansion'."

“H, hanging mansion?”

“It is now a ruin in the mountains where no one lives or approaches anymore. And it is there that ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ was born.”

A gulp rang out from my throat.

Sako put his hand on my shoulder, and rubbed it with the bony hand whose weight I did not feel.

“Listen to me carefully. Nagito Yamada-kun. The more excellent a soul is, the more troubled it is.”

Sako’s kind tone of voice was so warm that it felt as if it didn’t belong to the Sako I had known up until now.

And, it made me feel as if an elder brother I had parted ways with had unexpectedly appeared before my eyes.

“You will be compelled to make a choice in that mansion. With two precious things in front of you, you will be forced to make an exceedingly bitter choice.”

“……..”

“But what will make that choice is your soul, and no matter what conclusion it might bring about—”

Having spoken that far, Sako made the perfunctory smile he always made and said, “Well, it’s fine.”

“Oi—”

“It’s fine, Nagito Yamada-kun. After all, being troubled is a privilege of the young.”

○

“Where are you headed?”

On the bus, an elderly grandfather with a bamboo basket on his back asked us.

I looked to my side, to see Yoishi fiddling with her phone without saying anything, so having no choice, I answered him.

“Ummm… we’re going to a friend’s house for a bit.”

“Ooh, is that right?”

The elderly gentleman nodded with a good-natured expression, as if he were about to puff a cigarette, and sat down in the seat next to us.

The bus rattled and swayed as it leisurely moved along the mountain road with several passengers on board. I somehow looked outside the window, and saw that the houses were steadily becoming sparser, and all that lay beyond them were magnificent undulating mountains.

And at my feet was a large rucksack I had borrowed from a friend in the mountaineering club. I didn’t know if we would easily be able to find accommodation, so I borrowed as much camping gear as I could cram into the rucksack and brought it along.

The address Sako had written, K city. Y-Prefecture—

Yoishi and I were on our way there, having switched trains, and rode the only bus that came only once every hour.

The sun would soon be setting in the area. The mountain ridges were dyed in a golden colored light. The scenery alone was quite beautiful and nostalgic, but when I thought about the building we were headed towards, my buoyant mood continued to sink.

“Something terrible inhabits these mountains.”

The old grandad from earlier blurted out.

“You can't look them in the eye because if you do, you'll end up dead.”

It must have been a legend you’d often find passed down in rural areas.

“Um, what is it called?”

I asked, and the grandad replied, “…It’s called,” before falling into silence for a while.

“It’s called… No, it’s better if you don’t know. Because you might end up summoning it if you know it.”

In response, Yoishi suddenly opened her mouth.

“Are you talking about 『Gandame』 or 『Yousen boy』?”

“Y, young lady, you shouldn’t. Don’t say the names.”

The grandad hurriedly warned Yoishi, but as for me, I wanted to rebuke him, ‘Grandpa, you're wrong.’

You must not tell her the things ‘she shouldn’t do’. And as expected, Yoishi’s eyes glittered,

“…Gandame, Yousen boy, Gandame, Yousen boy.” She began to repeat it.

‘Eek’, as the grandad recoiled backwards, I bonked her on the head.

“…..My apologies, she’s, a little strange.”

I apologized profusely, and gazed at Yoishi who had fallen silent in discontent—

I let out a sigh in my heart by myself at the troubles that were to come.

I say troubles, but I wasn’t sure if I completely understood the details of those troubles.

Krishna-san’s sudden disappearance—I was unbearably worried about

that, but I had left it to Sako who said he would meet up with Yukihito-kun and deal with it. Apparently, according to Sako, heading to this address together with Yoishi had priority above all else. Well, I had a feeling I could leave it to him since Sako seemed to act properly when it came to Krishna-san, but—the biggest problem of all was the weight of his words: 『Please complete Yoishi-kun's story』.

The problem was whether I could really do something like that.

I came this far trying countless times to do something about the darkness 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' carried. Despite being repeatedly told by Krishna-san that it was impossible, I recklessly stepped foot into the abyss of the world beyond, and each time, I would retreat with tears in my eyes. And what could I do now that I came here with no trump card? What could I possibly do by brazenly going to the 'place Yoishi Mitsurugi was born'? Sako also told me that 『The one you're in a race against time for is not Kurimoto-kun』, but I had no idea why there was a race against time at all. However, it was also true that after hearing the story of 'Sako Takita', my image of him had ended up changing quite dramatically, and for once I had a feeling that it would be better to believe him.

That's why after I parted ways with Sako at Kanda Myoujin, I gathered the camping gear and headed to the library for the time being.

Fear comes from ignorance. Those were Krishna-san's words, but there was nothing scarier than going to a place called 'hell' without knowing anything. I looked up any articles I could get my hands on in the library corresponding to the incidents in 'K city, Y-Prefecture' and 'Hanging mansion'. And then, I finally called Yoishi, but—

"Hey, Yoishi."

"……..What?"

"I told you we were going to Y prefecture, didn't I?"

"Right."

“I told you we probably won’t return for a few days so come prepared, didn’t I?”

“I remember you saying that.”

“So, why are you here empty-handed in your school uniform?”

Around two hours ago, I arrived at the station we were supposed to meet up at, and was exasperated.

I didn’t expect her to bring a rucksack like me, but I thought she would at least bring a small bag. But it was as usual with ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’, she hadn’t changed even the slightest.

Wearing a black blazer, black tie, black skirt. Navy blue socks, and black leather shoes.

Yoishi Mitsurugi stood there in her dazzling Koumei high school uniform. She didn’t look as if she had brought a change of clothes, or even a toothbrush or a towel. With only her mobile phone in hand, she had the same unfriendly, or rather blank expression with her excessively well-proportioned beauty looking at me, and her long black hair danced in the wind.

“Don’t you think you’re travelling a little too light?”

“It’s not a problem.”

“Well…that might be the case but…”

Come to think of it, I was beginning to like an idiot for bringing such a large backpack.

“Leaving that aside, where are we headed in Y prefecture?”

She suddenly asked, “Eh?” I was at a loss for words.

“You only said we were going to Y prefecture.”

“….Ah, ahhh….ermmm.”

No, I had to say it sooner or later, and she might figure it out along

the way, but it was still difficult to say face to face, that the place we were headed towards was the birthplace of Yoishi Mitsurugi.

“I mean, really. I don't think it's right to accept an invitation to stay overnight without asking what kind of place you're going to. That’s no good for a girl before marriage.”

I pretended not to notice that I was the one who invited her,

“Didn’t I become your property?”

Yoishi retorted, and this time I was absolutely speechless.

And, I recalled once more.

The thing that happened recently—in short, when I ended up telling Yoishi’s father in front of her, ‘Give Yoishi to me’.

Somehow even Krishna-san was flushed bright red in her nose and said something like, ‘You two have my blessing. I’ll pray for your happiness’, but was that taken as a proposal or something? No, Krishna-san was weak to sake and that kind of talk to the extreme, but did Yoishi end up interpreting it as such?

As she looked at me with her large black eyes, my cheeks suddenly became hot.

My perception of ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ had been sealed away by Sako, and that was removed by Yoishi herself through regression hypnosis —and now that I took a long hard look at her once more, I saw that she was truly beautiful. Her pale translucent skin was unnatural for someone of Japanese descent with nary a single blemish, and her face was lined with fairy like features. Her eyes were a little dark, but on the contrary, they promoted her seducing harmony, and I think her appearance made any passerby look back at her.

That kind of girl—a possession? No, would she be my fiancée as per societal norms?

Ahh, but her father did indeed say…’Do as you like’.

Which meant that in short, he approved….?!

When I remembered that, my cheeks abruptly became flush hot, and a fluffy feeling rose up at the pit of my stomach.

I coughed once exaggeratedly and looked away.

And then I was startled.

Before I'd realized, the old grandad sitting in the seat next to me had vanished.

Or rather, it was only me, Yoishi and the driver on the bus.

"What happened to that grandad?"

"…Who knows?"

"When did they all get off? It didn't feel like the bus had stopped."

In response Yoishi muttered somewhat enjoyably.

"Perhaps—the elderly man might have been Gandame."

A cold shiver ran round my back all at once in response to that cold, piercing whisper.

Immediately, it felt as if I was completely in a dream, having been in the hustle and bustle of the city merely a few hours ago, and was now, travelling left and right on a dark mountain road at dusk.

"…..We didn't miss our stop, did we? Did you listen to the announcements carefully?"

Anxious, I took out the piece of paper in my pocket, and as I was confirming the address,

"That place."

Yoishi merely muttered, having peeked at the piece of paper.

"Are we going to that place?"

I was speechless for a moment—before I made up my mind and nodded.

“…Ahh, that’s right. We’re headed to this place now.”

“……..”

“…Is it a problem?”

Yoishi closed her phone, and fell into silence for a while as she looked at the darkness beyond the window.

“I’m sorry I brought you along without telling you—but, I thought it was time to settle things.”

I carefully chose my words as I spoke.

In response—

“It’s fine, but--”

As she continued to gaze out of the window, Yoishi spoke in a whisper.

“It’s just, I thought I would go there a little later.”

“What do you mean?”

“That mansion is the last place I ever intended to visit in my life.”

“……”

“If I don't feel fear there... it's impossible for me to feel fear again.”

Her words gave me strange goosebumps all over my body.

….Which meant that, what?

That the mansion we were headed to now, was something at a level far above just bringing me to tears as had been the case up until now?

“How did you find out about that place?”

“Ummm….I heard about it from Sako.”

“….Is that so?”

“….Um…was…”

I gulped once, and dared to ask.

“Did you know Sako?”

In response, Yoishi slowly turned towards me, and looked at me inquisitively.

“He said he met you a long time ago.”

“……..”

Something at the back of Yoishi’s eyes flickered, as if she were trying to remember something.

Something she didn’t want to remember. Something she shouldn’t remember. Fragments of dark, sedimented memories appeared and disappeared beyond her eyes, and she eventually gave a small nod.

“…….Ahh……that person……”

However, Yoishi said nothing more from there. And I too, couldn’t ask any further.

Just what happened to you ten years and eight months ago—Why did you take on the name of ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’? That’s not your real name, is it? Asking that simple question was unbearably heavy.

“I don’t know why we’re going to that mansion, and what you’re trying to do.”

Yoishi eventually murmured in a whisper.

“But that is without a doubt the worst place for me.”

“……..”

“There’s no guarantee that I will be myself. I might not be able to help you if something happens to you. Are you still alright with that?”

Ahhh, I know already.

…..I couldn't say it being the weak coward that I was, but I still nodded with all the courage I could muster.

"Going around haunted places is just like life….at your own responsibility, right?"

At that moment—

I noticed that the bus driver had been gazing at us all this time through the back mirror.

The dark area around his eyes seemed to be contorted in a sneer.

And, I felt as if I shouldn't make eye contact even if it was through the back mirror.

I didn't know about 『Gandame』, or 『Yousen boy』, but—

I thought that we were already in the world beyond.

○

The mansion, illuminated by the pocket light, was already in a state of decay.

After getting off the bus, we climbed up the dark mountain road for a long time, and the mansion we reached at last was the very definition of a haunted house.

The mansion merely loomed jet black beyond the white fence.

We were silent for a while, standing still with lights in one hand in front of the iron gate.

"…Shall we go?"

I called out to Yoishi, who unusually didn't try to enter, and I pushed the creaking gate open.

The large garden was already rampant with weeds, with nary a place to plant my feet. I raised my legs in exaggerated movements as I continued, until I eventually arrived close to the front door of the mansion. However, the door was boarded shut to deter anyone from entering. I shone my light to see a sign that read, 『Unauthorized entry is forbidden』. There were many large spiders and spiderwebs that hung all over, something you would never see in the city.

I moved a little further away and aimed my light here and there. Beyond the window on the second floor was a curtain drawn halfway that looked eerily like someone's head would peek out if I continued looking. Ivy ran along the wall of the mansion extending all the way up to the roof.

"….This mansion is way beyond what I expected."

I said so, but there was no reply.

I turned around, to see that Yoishi was silently staring at a section in the garden.

I approached and stood next to her, and aimed my light in the direction of Yoishi's gaze. What lay there was an old camping grill. It was already rusted and fallen over. A small camping chair was also lying there. They might have been used for barbecuing here once in the past. I crouched down to shine my light at them, and found several firework cinders on the ground as well. These symbols of a peaceful summer holiday were saddening to see in the garden of a decayed mansion.

"…Are you alright?"

Seeing her shoulders slowly move up and down, I called out to her.

Yoishi nodded without a word, but she indeed did not have her usual vigor when she faced the occult.

"It's probably a little late to enter this mansion right now. Let's pitch our tent here, shall we?"

I raised my voice as cheerfully as I could, and lowered the rucksack on my back.

“I have a friend in university named Yamaoka. He’s in the mountaineering club, extremely fit despite his small size, and he has a great sense of humor to boot. He let me borrow a lot of stuff. A tent for three. Two sleeping bags. I brought a lot of food as well, and even a burner. Let’s grill something for dinner, shall we? Ahh, or maybe you’d like me to make some coffee?”

“If it’s a bedroom you need then there’s one inside.”

“….Eh?”

“On the second floor, there’s a room that is safe to use.”

“No…the inside is, um, it’s quite dangerous right? This isn’t the usual haunted spot investigation. It’s better that we go in when it’s bright.”

I said that, but Yoishi had already set off for the front door, used her foot as a pivot and audaciously began to remove the planks that had been hammered into place. She removed the planks one-by-one, causing cracking and scraping noises to echo loudly in the mountain that was deathly silent at night.

“It’s not a problem if we put a tent out here though.”

With her back towards me, Yoishi spoke as she removed the planks.

“There’s a dead person in that garden as well.”

“…….Eh?”

“If that’s alright with you, then you can set up camp there.”

“……Say that from the start.”

Having no choice, I helped her.

The planks had rotted considerably, probably from the many years of wind and rain, and were removed fairly easily.

“The key?”

“A, ahh, here.”

I took the key Sako gave to me out of my pocket and handed it over to Yoishi.

Yoishi stared at the key for a while—before slowly placing it into the keyhole. A pleasant click rang out, and the lock was opened. As the creaking door slowly opened, I felt something rustling beyond the darkness—and I closed my eyes in an instant. After taking a single deep breath, I slowly opened my eyes.

A thick, incredibly heavy darkness leaked out from behind the half open door.

But, Yoishi remained there, standing still as a rock. Her back, which would never hesitate to step forth into any darkness, wasn’t there. All that was there was the back of a young high school girl, who was unable to take one step ahead in the face of overwhelming darkness.

“Could it be—that you’re…scared?”

“……..I don’t know.”

Yoishi answered silently.

“I don’t know if this is what it means to be afraid. But, my feet are…”

I looked to see that Yoishi’s feet in her black leather shoes were quivering slightly.

I went back to pick up my rucksack, put it on my back and silently gripped Yoishi’s hand. The moment I gripped her soft and cold hand---Ahh, I realized.

The reason why I came all the way out here. And, what needed to be done here.

Wasn’t that, to confront the past together with Yoishi—And, to hear her true name from her own mouth?

Krishna-san had said it before. 『Names are what bind the entirety of living things to the world』.

That's right. There was only one thing for the disciples of the witch to do. That was to research the real names of all events and creatures in the world and their history, and once you take back your 'true name', the worn 'W' should disappear.

Alright, I said to myself, and put strength into my stomach—

"…Let's go. Alright?"

I asked, and Yoishi gave a small nod without a word.

For the first time since I'd gone with her through numerous paranormal events—I took the lead.

With a dull thud, I threw the door open.

I was greeted with the smell of dust assailing my nostrils, and a damp atmosphere that coiled around my body. With my right hand gripping Yoishi's hand, I illuminated the mansion with the light in my left hand, and slowly took a step forward.

In front of the wide entrance hallway was a corridor, and it was dark to the point where my mini light could barely illuminate it. Nevertheless, I could see that the stairs to the second floor were on my right-hand side, and the spacious living room lay beyond the door to my left-hand side. At any rate, I felt countless presences everywhere, and I asked as I tried to keep my eyes focused on my feet.

"Where is the bedroom you said we could use?"

"Upstairs, at the back."

"…Got it."

I tried not to look anywhere, as I barged inside while still wearing my shoes, which was, sorry to say, always the case with haunted spots.

The stairs creaked as I climbed them one-by-one. I aimed my light up

to see that the second floor looked even darker. The light formed a ceiling shadow of the handrail that moved, which felt extremely unsettling.

“The back of the second floor—that way, huh?”

As soon as I reached the top of the stairs, I saw that there were doors on each side of the second-floor corridor, and a door in the back. I quickened my steps as if I would be in a safe zone once I reached there, and pulled Yoishi with me towards that door. There, I opened it in a single breath.

Inside was a simple guest room with two beds, a small table, and a closet installed on the wall. I breathed out a sigh of relief, pulled Yoishi inside, and closed the door.

“It sure is a nice room.”

As I said that, I tried to twiddle with the switch on the wall, but as expected there didn’t seem to be any electricity, and it remained completely dark.

“Ah, come to think of it.”

I suddenly remembered and took out a portable lantern from my rucksack. I clumsily fiddled it with my shaky hands. As taught by Yamaoka from the mountaineering club, I thrust a rechargeable lighter in the hole and ignited it. Soon, a warm flame flared up and eventually grew, dimly illuminating the interior of the room.

“…….Ohh.”

“……”

Yoishi and I, merely gazed at that light in a daze.

I had thought countless times that light was truly grand —but this was the first time I had been moved to the point of tears. Yamaoka insisted it when I borrowed the camping equipment, 『Camping is a completely different experience without it』, and forcibly crammed it in the rucksack over my objections….but, If I safely make it back, I have to express my profound thanks. If I didn’t have this, then the

strange intimidating air that enveloped this mansion might have continued to weaken my spirit.

“This sure is good. It’s somehow really encouraging.”

“…Yeah.”

Yoishi sat on the bed, and unusually agreed with me.

I looked at her for some reason—and after that, I looked at the other bed.

I just now realized that it was only me and Yoishi here; We had sneaked in at night in an uninhabited house commonly known as the 『Hanging mansion』.

“Ermm.”

I cleared my throat once and asked.

“Is it a problem If I use any of the other rooms?”

Yoishi slightly cocked her head to the side.

“You know, it’s problematic for the two of us to sleep in the same room. Just now you said that this room was not a problem, but what about the other rooms….or to be more precise, what exactly is the problem with them?”

“It’s fine if you don’t mind, but.”

Yoishi answered dispassionately.

“The people who used the other two rooms are dead.”

“……..”

..... I can't do it. I absolutely cannot do it.

In addition, this place was incomparably heavier and darker than all the haunted places we had visited so far. I nodded silently and sat down on the vacant bed after wiping away the dust on it. From there, we were both silent for a while. She had lied down with her back

towards me, and I was clearly getting an aura from her that a conversation was impossible.

It was still just a little past 8 pm.

It was a time when you'd normally be awake and doing activities, but the mountains at night were a different story altogether. When the moon hid behind the clouds, there was no light anywhere besides this lantern. Everything was painted pitch black, and it made you believe that you were in a completely different world, a world where human rules no longer applied.

It was just the two of us alone in the ruins of a building that was deathly silent— not an unusual situation for us, and yet, there was a strange atmosphere in the room. Perhaps because Yoishi was not her usual self.

Her eyes always glimmered in the face of the paranormal.

The more grotesque the situation trended towards, the stronger that dark light would shine.

But, right now, I—

I knew that the dark colored light at the back of her eyes was the thing I had to face. That knowledge made me feel as if there was someone else here besides the two of us, one more opponent, of an unknown nature.

But I had come mentally prepared with that in mind.

Determined, I calmly opened my rucksack. I took out copies of old newspaper and magazine articles I had obtained from the library before coming here, and spread them out under the light of the lantern.

It was commonly known as, 『The Hanging Mansion Family Massacre Case』. The major newspapers referred to it as 『K Lakeside Mountain Retreat Murder Case』, but the former was how it was referred to by the weekly magazines. And the source of that name came from the fact that the head of a household was found hanged in this mansion.

It happened around eleven years ago--- in short, it occurred on the 31st of July 2001.

I continued to read in sequence from a newspaper article to a weekly magazine article.

『Yesterday, inside a certain building in a mountain forest in K city, Y prefecture, the bodies of an active duty police officer and a Tokyo family that was staying at the house for a short period of time were discovered. The Y prefectural police have set up an investigation headquarters and have begun an investigation into the possibility of it being a crime or an accident. The connection between the family and the police officer is uncertain, but there is a possibility that the family was involved in some kind of trouble. According to the police statement, the bodies of the father and mother were discovered inside, and the body of the police officer and the family pet were discovered outside the building. The bodies of the eldest and younger daughter were discovered in the nearby K lake.』

『The father was discovered hanging by his neck in the living room.』 『The mother was found dismembered in the storage room.』 『The head patrol officer from the Metropolitan Police department was discovered stabbed to death in the garden.』 『Next to the head patrol officer was the body of a dog which is believed to be the family pet.』 『Around 1 kilometer below at K Lakeshore, the body of the elder sister was discovered. With lacerations at the base of her throat.』 『The body of the second daughter was also discovered at the same location. She drowned to death.』

As I continued to read, my feelings became heavier and heavier.

According to one expert's theory in a weekly magazine, this incident was a family suicide carried out by the father: he killed the mother, the officer, the dog, and when the sisters ran away, he followed them and killed them at the lake, and then returned to the mansion where he killed himself. I see, it more or less made sense. However, there were still mysteries that remained, such as why a police officer belonging to the Metropolitan Police department happened to be present in a mountain retreat at Y prefecture? And why did the father decide to commit a family suicide?

Above all, what I was most concerned about was how Yoishi and Sako were involved in this incident.

If it were eleven years ago, Yoishi would have been six or seven years old.

I could deduce that she must have been the elder or the younger sister, but—before, umm, I think it was in the Koumei Institute's 'Clock Tower Incident'? It felt as if she had talked about her elder sister. Which meant, that Yoishi must have been the younger daughter.

Having racked my brains on it thus far--I read through one of the articles once more, and found a mention of 'serious condition' with regards to the status of the younger daughter. I also found an article that said, 'She was transported to the hospital unconscious' and, 'The younger daughter in serious condition also passed away'. In short, the life and death status of the younger daughter was not mentioned clearly. There was no news of her whereabouts thereafter, as if she had dissolved into the darkness of this world. However, whether the culprit was her father or an outsider, the fact that the younger daughter survived, meant that she had gone through extreme hell--She had witnessed the entirety of what occurred in this mansion from beginning to end, and was probably aware of the identity of the true culprit.

And, thereupon,

I suddenly felt a strange tug at my heart.

It was as if I had overlooked an important path hidden by the vegetation in the dark forest.

I rearranged the scattered articles I had copied in order of date published. And then, I remembered what I felt when I was copying the articles in the library.

Yes—around two weeks after the incident, the number of reports on the incident dropped dramatically. After a month had passed, the verified reports were nowhere to be found. It is true that a wonder lasts but nine days, and even if the Japanese people had a capricious

nature-- but this was such a sensational incident. And on top of that, it was still unresolved to the present day. Wasn't it forgotten about a bit too quickly?

It was as if... they were trying to pretend it never have happened.

"... Press restrictions, huh?"

As I recall, if an incident fulfilled certain criteria, then in accordance with press agreements, the media may refrain from reporting it.

But I heard that it was only limited to kidnapping cases, or anything relating to the imperial household or political issues—

---No.

No…that wasn't all it was limited to.

I recalled an article I had read on an occult website. If I recalled correctly, there was an incident in which police rushed to the scene of the crime where a mother had been murdered, they found her infant daughter sitting there in a state of insanity and muttered, 'A demon appeared from the wall'. There was much debate as to the true identity of the 'demon', but news reporting of that incident suddenly ceased all at once.

There were a lot of occultic theories on the internet surrounding people who lived in the vicinity of the scene of the crime, but one day, the thread was locked with a message from someone believed to be an insider.

It was, 'The culprit was the daughter', 'Because she is an infant, press restrictions would be imposed.'

Something cold began to rise beneath my feet.

I slowly turned my head towards Yoishi who was lying on her side on the bed.

It can't be—

The first time I met Yoishi--- Yes, back in the 'Wish-fulfilling House'.

When I introduced myself, she merely said, 『I'm Yoishi』. I asked her, 『Isn't that a handle?』, and she denied it, saying, 『My surname is Mitsurugi. Not that it matters』. Back then, I wondered if she was fine with revealing her real name on the internet, but—was it because it wasn't her real name?

Come to think of it, I found out that the Noh-faced man who called himself Yoishi's father belonged to the 'Cabinet Information Research Office'. That meant it could influence the media to a greater or lesser extent— and not just that, it was also possible for it to take custody of a girl whose whereabouts were unknown….? No, what reason would someone in a government organization have for adopting the younger daughter?

Sako had been chasing the 'everlasting night stone' which was written in kanji as 「常夜石」. And he said that it was something that, 『Amplifies people's negative emotions, and manipulates them from the inside without them even knowing』, and that 『It makes people believe that people don't deserve to exist, it makes them destroy their surroundings, and themselves』.

If 'Mitsurugi' was that man's surname, but then, why did her first name become 'Yoishi'…..?

Before I'd realized it, my legs had started shaking. Right now, I thought the black-haired girl sleeping in the bed next to me was someone truly terrifying, and I felt fear to the point where my blood was being drained.

---It can't be, the true culprit from ten years ago was…..

"……..That's right."

At that moment, I jumped up with a start when Yoishi whispered as if she had read my heart. Yoishi slowly got up, moved to the edge of

the bed and sat there. And, she gazed for a while at the countless photocopies of articles scattered near my hands—

Eventually, she moved her pale face towards me. I trembled at the appearance of the dark light in her large eyes.

“……Hey, are you scared?”

“……..”

“Are you…. Scared of me right now?”

I couldn’t answer instantly—

But eventually, Ahh, I managed to squeeze a voice from my stinging, parched throat.

“……I’m scared. Of course I’m scared. To be honest, if we’d just met, I think I would have run away.”

“……..”

“But….it’s strange ---right now, I don’t care anymore.”

I forcefully put on a smile on my face.

Then, for some reason, I felt the back of my heart quietening into silence.

“If you are a survivor of this incident….and, if you’ve now taken the name of ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’, as someone who really does have another name. Then I don’t see anything wrong with that. I can’t see ghosts. I want to believe that they’re there, but to be honest I still can’t say for sure that they’re there. Even after witnessing countless paranormal things, I still can’t tell at all. But, what I truly believe is that there are souls. Warm souls, terrifying souls……. There must be countless souls in this world. They might dwell in buildings, in paintings, in music--- they might be the strength of people’s thoughts, but I feel their presence and I believe in their existence. And, the shape of your soul-- which I can feel, which has gone through so much pain and suffering, I believe that it’s beautiful despite everything. And I love that shape.”

"……."

Yoishi remained frozen in place, as she continued to gaze at my face---

And her beautifully shaped lips were about to say, 'You--', when they stopped.

"……You?"

"You….you truly are a fool."

Yoishi's voice had a tinge of embarrassment in it, when--

…….*Plop*……..

That sound echoed.

It sounded like water dripping somewhere.

That sound, which seemed as if it was right next to my ears, made me shudder for some reason.

"Is there… a water leak somewhere?"

I somehow managed to say that, and Yoishi shook her head.

"….It's calling me."

"…Eh?"

"It's in the bathroom."

Declaring that, something flickered beyond Yoishi's eyes that was illuminated by the lantern. Dark colored eyes and something I arbitrarily named was wriggling. And, that itself was the moment 'Yoishi' turned into the 'everlasting night stone'.

「Say, don't you want to go and take a look?」

Yoishi would probably whisper that from here.

And that was where the other world would begin. With a jerk, the world would flip upside down, and what would appear there would be a world you shouldn't see. The ground beneath my feet would tremble, creating a floating sensation as if I had lost everything. But, I would not be able to fight against it. It would be unbearably scary, but I would end up heading there as if being dragged by Yoishi---

And.

However, Yoishi didn't say anything no matter how much time passed.

Even though there was terror right next to her, she remained motionless as she continued to listen closely to the sound of water.

"…Yoishi?"

"This place is the reason why-- I hate baths."

"……"

"I… ended up making a mistake here I could never take back."

"….What, happened here?"

I asked her, but Yoishi remained silent and did not answer. Her face was contorted in pain, and she merely hung her head down.

If I continued to gaze at that face, an unbearable sadness would sweep over me as well, and before I'd realized, I stood up and said, "Okay". I drew closer to Yoishi and sniffed at her neck.

Yup, she stinks.

"Shall we take it, together?"

"……Eh……..?"

"The bath. If you know that this place is the cause, then that's even

more of a reason.”

“I, I refuse.”

“Shut up, just come. You haven’t taken a bath since you left my home, right?”

I was fully aware that I was saying something outrageous, but I was desperate when I decided to confront her.

I pulled Yoishi’s hand and made her stand, and spoke as if to conceal my embarrassment.

“I’ll wash your head. And this time—we’ll overcome it all.”

○

“It’s boiling over, nice hot water!”

I shouted through the glass door as I pulled my hand out of the bathtub in the pitch-black darkness.

Then, after a few moments, the glass door opened with a clank. Yoishi Mitsurugi appeared in the bathroom stark naked….or so I thought. In the darkness, I only caught a glimpse, but naturally, I immediately averted my eyes out of courtesy.

There was no electricity in the mansion, but it was most fortunate that the water was from a well and that propane gas was still available. Right now, the bathroom was filled with warm steam. Even though there must be plenty of occult fans all over the world, we were probably the only ones to take a bath in a haunted place. As I thought to myself, ‘Isn’t it a worthy achievement to have performed a reckless act so effortlessly?’, Yoishi quietly sat down on the seat next to me, holding what looked like a towel in hand. In the pitch-darkness of the bathroom, where only the steam gently enveloped our bodies, we continued to sit in silence, naked.

“Ermm… Wash your body first.”

I desperately tried not to be conscious of Yoishi next to me, filled the tub with hot water, and rubbed a soap that was there onto the towel and lathered it.

“Look, you wash yours. It’s alright. I don’t see anything. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“……”

Eventually, Yoishi placed something she was holding on the wash basin without saying a word.

“Hm…….? Wasn’t that a towel?”

I asked as I was scrubbing my body clean, but Yoishi seemed to have shaken her head without a word.

“Can I have a look at that?”

I washed the bubbles off my hand with hot water, turned off the faucet and then picked it up.

Checking it with my fingertips, I saw that it was something soft---some kind of stuffed toy.

“Ah….this, could it be the thing you always have attached to your bag? The stuffed frog?”

“….Yes.”

“Hmmm, is it your good luck charm?”

I asked as I touched the body of the stuffed frog with my fingertips. It was quite old and frayed in places, but—that touch made me feel strangely nostalgic.

“It’s not a good luck charm.”

After a while, Yoishi whispered.

“He’s, my only friend.”

For some reason, those words made my heart ache deep in my chest.

“In the past, he used to talk.”

“In the past…? He can’t do it now?”

“He doesn’t talk anymore.”

“……”

In a way, such a cute line from a girl was a problem because when Yoishi said it, it instantly became occultic in nature. And moreover, since we were in an abandoned building where no one lived and people had died, I had to be careful not to let the atmosphere go into a creepy direction as much as possible, or else my spirit couldn’t handle it.

When—suddenly, I heard a splash.

I looked to see that Yoishi had already entered the bathtub.

Apparently, after only a couple of splashes of hot water on her body, she had moved there with the stuffed frog in hand.

“Did you wash yourself properly?”

“I did.”

“You didn’t. The soap is still the same as it was in front of me.”

“…..I don’t want to use that soap.”

“Why?”

“Because it's still there, just as it was that day.”

I didn't know how to retort back to those words.

I quietly looked in the direction of the bathtub, to see that Yoishi was soaked in the hot water up to her chin, playing with the stuffed frog in hand.

She hadn’t tied her long hair, so it was scary to see her hair spread out on the surface of the water.

“….I ended up doubting her.”

“…….Eh?”

“Back then, mama asked me if she could join me—and I refused.”

“What do you mean, you refused?”

I asked, but Yoishi fell silent once more.

Eventually, she carefully chose each word as she spoke.

“It was mama… but I ended up doubting that it wasn’t mama.”

Not understanding it well, I listened silently as I continued to wash my body.

“…If I had opened the door for her back then…. A lot of things might have turned out differently.”

That must have been when Yoishi was probably six or seven years old —when she came to visit this mountain retreat with her family. Does that mean that Yoishi was alone in the bath when her mother came? Does that mean that her mother died the next day?

I recalled the article that said, 『The mother was found dismembered in the storage room』, and at the moment when bitterness overflowed in my chest—

I realized after all this time. I…. Ended up calling this mansion a ‘haunted place’ without consideration, but wasn’t it extremely rude to call it that, since it was a place where her family was? Once more, the words Krishna-san always told me stabbed my chest, ‘Have respect for the dead’, and I clutched my head in the darkness.

“….Regrets really are a thing, huh?”

After a while, I muttered.

“I always wonder after everything is over if I could have done a little bit more. I mean, my life is a repetition of that. I overslept, missed an important lecture and almost cried before the exam, I couldn’t

properly teach the newcomer at my part time job, and he suddenly stopped coming, I ended up eating an extra-large portion of gyudon even though I don't have money—No, what I have is nothing compared to what you are burdened with."

--*Splash* As I poured hot water on my shoulders to wash away the foam, I spoke, "Sorry".

"I'm sorry I ended up calling this house a 'haunted place'."

"….I don't really mind."

"No….but…."

Then, Yoishi merely muttered in the bathtub.

"What are *grudges*, exactly?"

"….Eh?"

"What do ghosts, bear a grudge against, exactly….? For example, what if you were to die a horrific death because of me? What if you still had so many things you wanted to do, but your life ended because of me? Would you too wander this world with a grudge….?"

I suddenly imagined ---myself as a ghost, just wandering this world endlessly. But at that moment, a strange loneliness swept over my chest. A world like ice, where no one could perceive me, where my words never reached anyone.

There, all I was, was confused.

I was befuddled, in agony, and wished to die quickly and properly. Even though I was already dead, I was impatient to die properly.

"……No."

I shook my head once, turned on the shower and poured hot water on my head.

"Rather than bearing a grudge, I think I'd be troubled."

“Troubled….?”

“I think that ghosts are probably just troubled. The moment they understand that they’re dead, they're upset because they don't know what to do, having experienced that for the first time. Ahh--- I can’t explain it well, but rather than asking questions about why they died or wanting to come back to life, they would be restless about what to do with themselves, and have no time to bear grudges against other people. ….Look, isn’t that why they draw close to you? They might be relying on you since they realize that you can see ghosts. Maybe they think you might believe in the myth that telling ghost stories attracts them.”

I excitedly talked as if I had accidentally touched on a secret—

“You—”

Yoishi coldly declared.

“Really are a fool.”

‘What the hell did you say?’, I was about to retort, when I stopped, thinking that it was inappropriate. I silently lathered up the shampoo that was there in my hands and started washing my hair feeling good.

It was my first time talking about ghosts and not being afraid. For the first time, I felt as if I understood the meaning of what Krishna-san always said, ‘Perhaps some ghosts play tricks on people, while other ghosts say, 'Come on, stop it,' and step in to intervene, yet no one ever thinks of the latter possibility’.

“Even if they're dead, ghosts aren’t different than people.”

I tried to sound as cool as I possibly could, when it happened.

As I was scrubbing my head with the shampoo, I suddenly felt a strange sensation.

As if the lathering was strangely sluggish — or rather, as if the amount of hair had strangely increased.

At that moment, I realized that there were long strands of hair

dropping on both sides of my face. It was as if someone had drawn their face close to the back of my head with their long black hair, and trirf to get me to wash their hair as well.

--It must be Yoishi.

You sure had the nerve to come up with a funny idea, as I quickly reached both hands to the back of my head. I was trying to take hold of that head: Yoishi's head, however.

"……Eh?"

There was nothing there, and my hands were wandering in empty air.

"Get out."

At the same time, a voice like a ringing bell echoed in the bathroom.

I looked to see Yoishi still immersed in the bathtub, gazing in my direction.

Her eyes in the darkness, were darker than darkness—

Her following words, directed towards something, made goosebumps run all over my body.

"You are already dead."

○

I'll never speak sagely of ghosts before her ever again.

I firmly made up my mind to do as I chanted the nembutsu[16] all night--And it was the following day.

Before I'd realized, I was sound asleep in the bed and woke up to find myself in heavenly sunshine. The chirping of the birds reverberated around me, and the branches of lush green trees peeked through the window.

Did I come to some hotel resort somewhere? I couldn't judge the situation right away and really thought that was the case, but--

No..... No, that wasn't it.

This was the mountain retreat where a mysterious massacre occurred eleven years ago.

With a start I raised my head, and saw that Yoishi was already awake and sitting on top of her bed, fiddling with her phone.

"...Ah... Good morning."

When I greeted her, she fleetingly glanced my way with her large eyes,

"My phone has a connection."

She spoke.

"Well, that's what it's supposed to do."

"There was no connection eleven years ago."

She stood up and pointed her phone here and there.

"Is there a problem if you have a connection?"

"……."

However, without answering, Yoishi put her phone away in her pocket, and turned her white face at me.

“What are we going to do from now on?”

“Well….”

No, I had no concrete ideas in mind.

I was under the impression that just coming here would be enough to settle something. I was told by Sako that I had to complete ‘Yoishi’s story’, and I thought that must have been ‘to hear Yoishi’s true name from her own mouth’. But— after thinking about it long and hard, that doesn't really need to be in this place, does it?

Which means….huh?

Why did Sako tell me about this place?

I raised my head, looked at the mansion walls, and thought of the room that was supposed to exist beyond it. After that, I pictured downstairs which was filled with far more creepiness than the second floor.

….Could it be?

Did it mean that there was something in this mansion that could finish this case?

“Let’s go.”

I declared, and Yoishi tilted her head slightly.

“We have to search this mansion.”

Yoishi asked, ‘For what?’, and in response:

“Something important.”

Without pause, I opened the door to the room.

All that was there on the other side of the creaking door was a corridor---but it wasn’t as dark as last night.

It was already bright with the light of the sun pouring in.

The stairs creaked as Yoishi and I descended to the ground floor. It was a building with many windows, and the warm sunshine poured in through all of them. It had lost the appearance of a haunted house and was now just an old mansion. Even so, the building still felt like a ruin, full of spider webs and dust-- but, as I thought that, I spotted something on the corridor floor. It was a yellow police tape. Apparently, it had been placed in front of the door leading to the living room.

Something bitter instantly rose up inside me, as I realized that this was a murder scene, and that the victims were Yoishi's relatives.

"Are you alright?"

I turned around and asked, and Yoishi nodded, looking paler than usual.

The living room was spacious. It was at the very least, around 32 square meters in size.

It had leather covered sofas, a fireplace, withered houseplants, and torn wallpaper.

But—

I thought once more. I didn't know why it was, but I didn't feel as if this was my first time in this mansion. Come to think of it, I felt that when I first looked up at this mansion from the garden last night. As if someone had said to me, "Welcome back". I recalled that feeling now once more and shuddered.

No--- I shook my head. No matter how much I turned the drawers of my memory upside down, I had never come to this mansion before. I only felt like I had been here before because this was a typical resort construction, and they all had a similar layout.

I continued to convince myself in that way, as I scooped off the piled-up dust on the sofa with my hands.

On the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room were three cups, and the tea or whatever that had been inside had already dried up and turned light brown. The family must have been enjoying

their time here together. They had no idea that a conclusion far terrible than they could have imagined awaited them….

I became strangely sentimental, maybe because I thought that it was Yoishi's family.

I was a weakling from the start, but I thought I had endurance with regards to the dead after their funeral had been completed. Once you die, there's no coming back. No matter how much I grieved and moaned, I could not overturn that rule of life. That's why, I didn't mourn more than necessary. After all, I too would die one day. At that time, I would meet them again. And, in order to have lots to talk about when I meet them again in that world, I would live a fruitful life, that's how I thought of it. That might have been the psychological coping mechanism I learned after the bitter separation from my mother.

But---

Something about this mansion was different.

I ended up thinking that maybe there was still something I could do about it.

Even though everyone was already dead….. and were no longer a part of this world, the vividness of the family pressed at me, a family that was not my own, but one that I could not think of as a stranger's.

Are…they still here?

Are Yoishi's mother, father, sister, and the policeman, still here in this mansion--?

I end up feeling like…. they entrusted me with something important that was left undone.

"….Huh?"

As I thought such things, I noticed that Yoishi was staring at something.

It was a small space above the hearth.

“What’s wrong?”

I called out to her and stood next to her---where I noticed.

It was a single photograph. A brown wooden photo frame had collapsed, and a discolored photograph lay beside it.

My heart beat out loud seeing the figures of the people in the picture.

“…..This……”

“My… family.’

“Is it alright…. if I take a look?”

“It’s fine, but—”

Yoishi added in a tone of voice that lacked emotion.

“It’s not really something pleasant.”

Hearing those words, I gulped.

Why hadn’t the police taken this picture away, even though they must have investigated the scene countless times? Come to think of it, why were all the cups I saw earlier still here? Suddenly, all sorts of questions crossed my mind, but in the end, I picked up that photograph.

It was a family photograph taken in the garden. The father, the mother, the elder sister, the younger sister, and the family dog—everyone was looking at the camera, and probably smiling in the polaroid picture. However, the moment I saw it, an intense chill ran down my back, causing me to almost let go of it.

For some reason….in that photograph of the father, the mother, the elder sister, and the dog—their faces were discolored white and stretched out in the air as if twisted by an invisible force so strong that they were about to disappear. Among them, only the young girl was smiling kindly. She looked this way with her beautiful white face, and her pretty, long black hair that swayed slightly in the wind.

“……U…..umm, you sure were cute.”

“You don’t have to force yourself.”

“No, really….”

“It becomes this type of photograph when that takes your life.”

“By t…that…could you possibly mean?”

…The ‘everlasting night stone’ that Sako mentioned?

The moment I was about to mention that name, Yoishi put her finger on my lips to stop me.

“It would be better not to say that name.”

I shuddered involuntarily.

“Because it’s everywhere at all times.”

“S…say, why…why did you take the name of Yoishi? If that name itself was ominous, and if you were aware of that, then why---?”

Without answering, Yoishi silently took the photograph from my hand and carefully placed it back in its original place.

“The police abandoned it.”

“Abandoned?”

“This photograph is as you can see. But, it wasn’t abandoned because of an exposure error. This entire mansion was abandoned, and the investigation itself was abandoned.”

“W, why?”

“Because the state unofficially recognized that long ago.”

Yoishi’s cold words left me aghast.

“It exists in every age, appears at whim, and consumes humans—stealing their lives. That’s why it has been recognized as a natural

disaster that possesses this country, like typhoons and earthquakes."

"No…that's—if it were a natural disaster, then why did you need to take that name?"

"Because—"

Yoishi stood stock still like a broken doll, and whispered.

"Because I'm the cause of all this."

"…….What?"

"Because I was an unwanted child that was never wished for."

"….There's no way that's true? There's no way a child is unloved by their parents."

"Thinking straightforwardly like that is a trait of yours, but—then, why does infanticide not cease in this world? What about the abuse that increases even now? And, what if… it was an unwanted pregnancy?"

……..

"What if….it was a life born from the violation of the mother by a complete stranger?"

"….Hey…it can't be…."

"If that were the case, I would erase myself."

Yoishi's large eyes harbored a pale blue flame as she spoke.

"That's why my face is white. Because of foreign blood. I didn't resemble anyone in my family. I was--"

"Cursed *before I was even born.*"

"That's exactly why I was chosen by that."

I….could not utter even a single word.

But from somewhere in the mansion that was as silent as death—something echoed as a substitute.

A biological, disgusting, whipping sound.

“….It has begun.”

“…….Eh?”

“It’s already begun.”

Yoishi looked me in the eyes, and spoke in a whisper.

“It’s going to be hell from now on.”

“….What?”

“If you want to go back, this is your last chance.”

“……”

“You’re free to do whatever you wish, but from here on, I’m not sure that I will continue to be myself. To run away from here, to forget everything, and to live a cheerful life would be without a doubt the right thing to do.”

Yoishi spoke that much forlornly, and turned away from me.

With a mechanical gait in her step, she walked straight out of the living room.

“W…. wait a minute!”

I was a step behind, and ran after her.

I caught up to Yoishi who was proceeding in the corridor, and grabbed her hand.

“I’m going as well.”

I declared, and Yoishi looked at me with lonely eyes.

I nodded strongly, and Yoishi silently looked down, and spoke.

“I’ll be relying on you from now on.”

“……Eh?”

“I know that’s completely unforgivable, but I can’t help but rely on you.”

“No……”

I spoke flustered.

“I don’t mind if you rely on me, you know? Well, although, I might be quite unreliable, but…”

In response, Yoishi bit her lips in irritation---

“Please, forgive me.”

She whispered that.

I stopped moving, not knowing what she meant—when Yoishi looked up at me and gazed at me. That white, unworldly, beautiful face declared as if melting into the darkness of this world.

“No matter what happens, no matter what you see… stay as you are. Stay as Nagito Yamada. Continue to stay that way--- that might be our only chance to win at the very last moment.”

It was an expression Yoishi Mitsurugi had shown me for the first time.

The girl who had never asked me for a single favor up until now, who had gleefully moved forward no matter what paranormal events she faced, the young girl who was acted coolly like a grand witch from antiquity even when faced with reality that would make you want to avert your eyes, showed me for the first time--- a sorrowful expression.

Please, forgive me.

She declared once more in a hoarse voice, and abruptly turned heel with a knock of her leather shoes.

After that, she didn't look back, as she continued into the darkness.

I fell behind for a moment—before following her.

The mansion corridor which had not been ventilated for a long time, creaked strangely, perhaps due to the humidity.

It wouldn't be strange if the floors collapsed at any given moment, and that instability was the same sensation I had whenever my legs froze from the sign of the world beyond.

The very back of the corridor.

The closer I got to the inconspicuous wooden door, the louder the whipping sound became.

"T...this sound."

I was about to ask what it was, but I couldn't say the words. Being the weakling that I was, my legs had already begun to tremble, and the root of my teeth didn't connect.

Yoishi made it that far without hesitation, placed her hand on the sliding door, and with a single breath, threw it open.

It was a storage room around 10 sqm in size.

There was a mop, a place for a large vacuum cleaner, a toolbox, an unused chair and such.

And, in the center, I saw a familiar childish face.

"—K…"

I was at a loss for words.

"…..Kri…shna-san?"

○

A petite figure was crouching in a dark corner of the room, devouring something.

Her short hair was messy, as if she hadn't returned home for many days—and her blue spring dress was torn in places and dirty with mud, as if she had tumbled down a mountain.

"Umm….Krishna-san….is that you….?"

In response, the girl looked in my direction, still clutching something with her hands.

She sneered in a satisfied smile with her white, cloudy eyes. I shuddered at the sight of the thing that protruded from her lips. From those cute lips which were always preaching to me with sermons of love, now protruded a large, wriggling centipede. She bit it off with those white teeth of hers, and chewed it crunchingly.

As I watched, unable to say anything —Krishna-san slowly stood up.

She then brought her hands, still covered with the remains of centipedes and other small animals, to her large breasts and grasped them violently. She then rubbed them vigorously. It made me feel a sense of unease, as if a different personality was using Krishna-san's arms to toy with her body. But, there was no eroticism in it. It was merely revolting; I felt disgust as if something precious was being defiled. it reminded me of a coven of witches – a sabbath that I had once seen illustrated in a book. That vulgar behavior was in no way the behavior of the Krishna-san I knew. She was so cute in all her actions that even when she had to be strict, she still lacked a sense of tension.

"What are you trying to do by moving to that person?"

Yoishi spoke coldly as she fixed her gaze on Krishna-san.

“Your place is inside me, isn’t it?”

With those words, I realized with a start.

“….Hey, it can’t be….?”

‘That’s right’, Yoishi gave a small nod.

“That person is Shiina Kurimoto, but it’s not her personality right now. The one who stands there is the one destroyed everyone precious to me: my best friend, my mother, my father, my elder sister, Leo, the detective-- The one who stands there… is the ‘Everlasting night stone’.”

Together with her words… I saw it.

Right now, in Krishna-san’s eyes, a dark light glimmered that was like the bewitching glimmer in Yoishi’s eyes in the face of the paranormal. Exposed to that dark light, countless scenes revived and connected in my mind. The countless mysteries, paranormal phenomenon which defied explanation that I had witnessed so far. Yoishi’s eyes would begin to glitter before them. But when she saw malice in the truth, Yoishi would always vomit. She would vomit in pain, as if trying to wipe away something inside her.

Was that---

Because this thing was inside her?

Was it because this thing was wriggling in delight inside Yoishi?

The sneering laughter that sounded like a man echoed in the dimly lit storage room and corridor.

The bobbed haired, baby face, the cheeks that would be described as adorable by a hundred out of a hundred people, Krishna-san contorted those cheeks—

And made a smile that was both broken and complacent.

“It crossed over from continental Asia in the past, was called ‘Nine tails’ at times, and ‘Everlasting night stone’ at times…. It moves freely from people to people, a natural disaster of this country that destroyed countless people all over, a hidden natural disaster—the purest ‘malice’ in this world.”

Yoishi’s words coldly reverberated in the room—

The earth shook. No, my torso was shaking in the face of being overwhelmingly powerless, and my knees were already shaking to the point of collapse.

Krishna-san….no, Shiina Kurimoto-san was the most reliable person for me since I moved to Tokyo alone. Her words were harsh at times, but even they were filled with love, because she was worried about me from the bottom of her heart, and she was the person who was the furthest away from the word ‘corrupted’. She was my holy mother, just making eye contact with her was enough to relax me and give me fluffy feelings at the pit of my stomach. No matter how close I came to breaking down, this person alone would always stand firmly on the ground, support me, and return me to myself. Now, there were no traces of that to be found anywhere. In its stead was malice bare to see, and it was as if just seeing her lurching figure was enough to distort the world.

「I’ll be right back. After I’ve enjoyed this one.」

As if declaring that, Krishna-san took the rat carcass she still held in her left hand, and plunged it headfirst into her mouth.

“S--”

Stop it. I was about to shout, when—

“Yo, there you are.”

I heard an aloof voice behind me.

After a few seconds—I turned around dumbfounded, to see the thin figure of Sako Takita.

Sako slipped past me who couldn't even move, and affectionately called out to Krishna-san.

"Kurimoto-kun, you shouldn't eat something like that. You'll end up getting diarrhea."

He was not dressed in his usual blue kinagashi. On his head he wore an eboshi[17]. His long hair, which was always unkempt had been neatly slicked back, and he was formally dressed in a black hakama and tall wooden clogs—but his appearance conversely made me feel the urgency of the situation.

"Now, let's go back, shall we? This is no place for you."

In response, the 'everlasting night stone' inside Krishna-san vibrated its throat. I couldn't clearly make out what it was saying—but it was clearly a sneering voice that rejected, disdained, and ridiculed Sako's suggestion.

"….Hm."

However, it seemed it had gotten through to Sako. He nodded several times and spoke.

"……..Ah, you shouldn't. Don't make a young woman use such indecent language. She is still a popular girl you see. You mustn't make light of Krishna fans all over the country…Eh? Mmhmm, you say you're not a fan? You're saying everyone uses the occult as a pretext to see Kurimoto-kun's body, and that they must be stripping her naked in their head?"

Sako spoke as if he were a proxy of a beast, and then turned my way.

"Are you like that?"

"……..Eh?"

"Well, you can't clearly deny it as a man—but that's not quite right."

Sako turned to face the front once more.

“Hey, listen up, will you? Those large, large attractive breasts of Kurimoto-kun are comforting, you see. They are a symbol of her love that gently envelop everything. It's true that large breasts on a petite body can give off an unbalanced appeal, but what all men of this world instinctually crave is, the motherly love she exudes. Don’t be mistaken, not everyone in this world is a dark, malicious and perverse insect like you.”

As Sako declared that, the ‘everlasting night stone’ vibrated the back of her throat once more, but—

Sako ignored it on purpose, and quietly turned to Yoishi this time.

“Now then—let me say it once more.”

For some reason he made sure to straighten his back and politely sent those words to Yoishi.

“You did well to survive.”

Yoishi gazed back at Sako’s face without a word.

Was it my imagination, or did it feel as if her eyes were gently narrowed.

“I apologize for not being aware of your existence sooner --- Well, it is as you can see. Please forgive me.”

To Sako who bowed down, Yoishi merely muttered, “I don’t really mind.”

“…I only just realized it yesterday.”

“Oh?”

“I was told by that person.”

She pointed at me, ‘Hoho’, Sako happily swung his shoulders.

….I didn’t know what was going on. But from the way Sako was

acting so relaxed—did that mean that we and Krishna-san were alright now? Yoishi said something about how it was going to be hell from now on….Does that mean it will be averted?

“Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun.”

Sako then put a friendly smile on his face and declared.

“Please allow me to declare this in advance. In the unlikely event that you become the ‘everlasting night stone’—I will kill you here.”

……Huh?

“You may or may not have already realized, but I managed to cling to this uninteresting world and lived thus far to dispose of this trash known as the ‘everlasting night stone’. I will make it regret it so much that it curses itself for appearing in this world and for its continuing meddling with human beings —and I will tear it to pieces.”

“….I know.”

“—H, hey, hey ,hey, wait a second!”

I unconsciously butted in their conversation, when Sako simply stopped me from interrupting with his hand, and spoke.

“Now, now, please calm down, this was a talk of the worst-case scenario. There will be no casualties if we can deal with it now.”

At that moment---a piercing, sneering laughter reverberated, as if pounding the mansion. I looked to see Krishna-san…no, what was now the ‘everlasting night stone’ bending its petite body with tears in its eyes as it laughed.

“Something, is strange.”

Saying that coldly, Sako held up the three-pronged Gokosho[18] in his hand—and made several signs in midair. Krishna-san instantly stopped laughing as she coughed and collapsed while still bent backwards. The way she fell didn’t look safe at all, and I was reflexively about to rush over, but—

“Next, I will tear you to pieces.”

Sako cleanly cut the Kuji[19] with his fingertips, and began to speak words I had never heard before.

It must have been a sort of ritual prayer I had no knowledge of—

The clear, resonant Kotodama that flowed from his mouth made Krishna-san’s petite body arch backwards in a bind.

“This mansion is closed by a barrier on all four sides. I will first remove the original fox soul of the ‘everlasting night stone’. Furthermore, I will get rid of the countless deep-seated grudges that have combined--- and finally separate them, leaving only the personality situated at the highest order.”

Sako dispassionately explained after finishing his ritual prayer, and began to draw some kind of pattern at Krishna-san’s feet with unrefined salt.

However—the guffawing, sneering laughter continued.

Krishna-san, having collapsed on the ground, still had a painful smile contorted as the tears streamed down her face. It was if she were witnessing something truly foolish—as if there was a mistake in front of her eyes which only she had realized—she merely convulsed with laughter as she pointed at Sako.

“It must be painful.”

Sako on the other hand, showed pity.

“But there's not the slightest chance I'd want to help you.”

At that moment, Krishna-san’s eyes distorted more fiendishly than I had never seen before.

As if in reply— Sako’s pale face muttered in a whisper that horrified me as I watched.

“—You, devoured my mother.”

“……”

“And you devoured my father. However, failing to devour me was a lethal mistake on your part.”

“Kokoko.”

The ‘everlasting night stone’ let out a strange, trembling voice.

It appeared as if it were somewhat perplexed.

It looked perplexed as if it had devoured so much it couldn't remember ---And , I saw Sako’s eyebrows furrow slightly in response. It was the first time I saw the emotion of anger emanate from Sako.

As soon as the pattern was finished, Krishna-san’s body crumpled even further into the ground as if it was crushed by gravity. This time, she indeed sounded as if she was in pain. But—even though it might have been the ‘everlasting night stone’ inside, it still appeared as Krishna-san. I couldn't stand it any longer, and at some point, I slowly drew closer, when—

“You’ll get devoured.”

Sako’s words stopped my movements with a jerk.

Sako swept his hakama as he sat in the seiza position, and with his eyes half-closed, began a sonorous ritual prayer once more.

It was as if to tighten the air to make invisible signs, and rearrange the sounds of the world as if to make a hidden rhyme.

It made Krishna-san’s collapsed body writhe in pain and bounce up and down as if it were billowing.

--Amazing.

I didn’t quite know what was happening, but it was overwhelming, I thought.

--Just a little more… with just a little bit more, would things really turn out alright?

My heart began to throb with anticipation, even though I knew I shouldn't feel safe just yet.

But—at that moment.

I suddenly noticed Yoishi, who had been silent all this time.

Yoishi's cold gaze, her unresponsiveness after having coexisted together with the 'everlasting night stone' in her body since that incident eleven years ago, made me feel a terrible premonition. I then recalled Sako's words.

….Huh…just now, Sako said that this building was inside a barrier. Could it be that the so-called 'everlasting night stone' that was now possessing Krishna-san, would after being severed from her, simply return to Yoishi once more who was inside the barrier? Or was the pattern Sako drew just now at Krishna-san's feet a new, different barrier altogether?

"Well, you see."

As he continued making the signs with his fingers, Sako answered with his back still turned toward me, as if he had sensed my concern.

"In the unlikely chance the 'everlasting night stone' that detaches from Kurimoto-kun breaks this barrier and possesses you, I will kill you. If it possesses Yoishi-kun, I will kill her. If I fail to sever it, I will kill Kurimoto-kun. I would be deemed a murderer according to this country, but that is of no concern to me. The only way to teach it the concept of 'death' is to let it experience it while it is bound to some kind of body. Having said that, you all might be a bit reluctant—well do forgive me for that."

….H, hey, you can't be serious.

"But—you see. Don't you think it strange?"

As I was dismayed, Sako declared to me amused.

"Why do you believe Yoishi-kun didn't die even though eleven years have passed since that incident?"

“……Eh?”

“Why do you believe she used illogical methods to save you at times?”

“……”

“That is because—”

Sako’s mouth twisted into a happy smile, and he spoke.

“The ‘everlasting night stone’ failed in its incarnation long ago.”

“……”

“Eleven years ago, in this mansion, under a devilish plan, the heart of a child it believed it had completely destroyed was protected by a certain accident.”

“…….Accident? What do you mean accident?”

But without answering my question, Sako continued to speak.

“Call it an accident, inevitability, or you could even call it a miracle--- at any rate, it set up several atrocities to crush the young girl’s heart and create a hollow vessel, but it failed. But—this gives birth to a question. There was no need at all for Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun to be the only body the ‘everlasting night stone’ incarnated itself in.”

“……Eh?”

“There are probably a great many beautiful boys and girls in this world who have had a sorrowful upbringing, who excel at a spiritual disposition. The ‘everlasting night stone’ is pure malice boiled down to its essence, and its actions are always shaped by calculated malice, and if it failed once, it would spread malice elsewhere once more. Its behavioral pattern is, if anything, almost refreshing. Despite that, on this occasion, it possessed ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi’ for eleven long years. Why do you think that is?”

I looked at Yoishi.

I looked at her pale, extremely well proportioned, calm face once more.

“That is because she dared to take the name of 『Yoishi』 herself.”

“……Ah.”

“’Names’ in this world hold the meaning of ‘place’. Despite failing to incarnate, the reason it clung to Yoishi was because she christened herself as 『Yoishi』, and stitched it into her own body to prevent it from escaping anywhere.”

Why did Yoishi need to use that name?

When I asked her that just a while ago—Yoishi answered that it was because she was the cause of all this. Because she was a life born from the violation of her mother by a complete stranger, and that was exactly why she was cursed before she was even born.

But…that wasn’t the only reason.

“It is true that it is far safer for everyone to know where the everlasting night stone is than not to know where it is.”

Sako spoke sadly.

“The young girl who willingly became the den for the ‘everlasting night stone’ was under the custody of the state for that very reason. She was implanted with a GPS tracker in her body, and was kept under surveillance twenty four hours a day: not allowed to die, and placed in a condition where she couldn’t have been said to be alive either.”

I recalled the face of that tall Noh-faced man.

Since I first met him, he kept referring to Yoishi as ‘that’— was that what he meant?

Did he only see her as a box of calamity that could not be opened?

“Y…you’ve gotta be kidding me….”

I looked at Yoishi in response to Sako's words, who was listening with a vacant expression, and I shouted out loud unable to bear it anymore.

"That…that's, absolutely wrong!"

"It's not wrong. Everything has fallen into place in a very rational way, and a state of equilibrium has finally been achieved."

"No… that's completely wrong….what about her being left in a state of uncertainty where she's nether dead or alive? Did a bunch of adults who should have known better not think of Yoishi's feelings at all?"

"And by thinking---what would they achieve?"

At that moment, Yoishi's whisper reached my ears.

"Could anyone do anything? No, there's nothing that could be done. That's why I decided not to feel anything. What I saw, the words I was exposed to, my changing environment — I decided to accept none of it, and just let it wash over me."

"…That's…"

I recalled her slender back, she walked alone as if she carried a heavy burden all by herself.

I recalled the way she lived her life, her head hung down with a stooped back, as she tried not to make eye contact with anyone.

I recalled the way she stood still in the depths of eternal darkness all by herself, as her eyes coldly gazed at the paranormal of this world.

"At that time, at that age, under those circumstances--"

Sako spoke as he looked at Yoishi, narrowing his narrow eyes even further.

"It was a terrifyingly excellent decision to make. It would have been impossible for me to do the same. How painful must that have been?"

Suddenly, I realized Yoishi was gripping something tightly.

It was the stuffed frog Yoishi treasured as if it were a good luck charm.

Sako too, looked down towards the stuffed animal, and suddenly smiled. Then, for some reason, he looked at me, and this time, put on a smile of a wicked disposition.

“Well, thanks to several accidents—the life of a man who disgracefully ran away has also been rewarded.”

It was the moment he declared that.

--*Snap* *Crack*, I heard the sound of something splitting open here and there in the mansion.

I looked up, and it soon turned into a sound like a sharp, cracking sound of a dead tree snapping off—

And it felt, as if it changed to a high-pitched laugh.

As I thought about the thing I heard just now, and the meaning behind it, I shifted my gaze back at Sako in a daze.

……..Eh?

I saw scarlet at the center of Sako’s pale face. Before I realized, a streak of blood was trickling down Sako’s tall nose. Sako must have also noticed it, as he wiped the nosebleed with a vacant expression. However, the nosebleed that was trickling from Sako’s right nostril had now begun to trickle from his left nostril as well. The gooey blood started trickled down.

“….Hey, Sako….”

No, it wasn’t just through both nostrils. From his ears, his mouth, his eyes….at some point, blood had begun to drip through the holes in his hair follicles to the point where his entire hair was black and wet. Blood gushed from every orifice of his body without stopping, wetting his whole skin.

“Ah….”

Sako’s fingers were trembling and unable to form seals. Ony mere words of delirium were emitted from his lips that were poor in complexion.

“…..H…Hey, Sako……!”

I supported Sako’s body, which was on the verge of collapse. Sako’s body, which was violently shaking and about to fall, felt as light as air. And his white clothes were dyed deep red as if they had been crimson from the start.

“……..H, hey Sako! Stay with me!!”

“….Hu…..”

Those faint words that escaped Sako’s lips reached my ears.

“…….Humans…… can ne…ver…..win…..”

What the hell are you saying….?

I was about to say that, but that grumble did not become my voice.

Sako gazed at me, and a faint smile appeared on his pale face, as he continued to speak with the utmost effort.

“…They just… do… lose..... Don’t..... even think...of winning….”

Are you complaining now of all times?

His abrupt proclamation of defeat made the pit of my stomach churn.

However, it was not so much that I was disgusted with him – but rather, it a feeling of regret for Sako who had hunted down the ‘everlasting night stone’ to this point. And, at the same time, I didn’t know what the meaning of simply spouting such words here. Did he already assess victory or defeat? Or was there some other meaning behind them?

“Hey, Sako!!”

Without knowing what to do, I foolishly kept screaming at Sako.

“…There’s… no chance you will win …. Who, or what…. Are you going to win against…?”

Sako tried to scratch at midair with no strength in his fingers.

I realized that his fingertips were aimed at Yoishi—

And, the moment I noticed Yoishi Mitsurugi coldly fixated at Sako who was lying there covered in blood – Sako coughed a spurt of blood from his mouth, and his strength quietly disappeared in my arms.

“……..There’s no way—right?”

I looked at Sako’s face, who was stock still with his eyes slightly open —

And then, I turned to Yoishi.

“…..Y, Yoishi, do something! What should we do about Sako?”

She silently glimpsed at Sako’s immobile body,

“You can’t incarnate in me by destroying this person.”

Yoishi spun her words towards midair.

“Showing me people dying… doesn’t make me feel anything anymore.”

In response, the mansion creaked once more. *Crrrreeeak*

That strange sound—made Yoishi’s eyes slightly widen.

As if she had realized something, she suddenly turned to look in my direction.

- Crrrreeeak**Crrrreeeak**Crrrreeeak**Crrrreeeak*

The old mansion was creaking.

- Crrrreeeak**Crrrreeeak**Crrrreeeak**Crrrreeeeeeaaaaaaaeak**Crrrrea

The timber was chafing together, and it sounded like someone's sneering laughter.

That's right--- right now, someone was sneering somewhere.

In a loud shrill laugh, as if everything was going according to plan.

And I-- was merely standing in a daze in a world that was rapidly changing.

No, Sako's words repeatedly swirled in my head, and I kept thinking about their meaning in a daze.

『The 'everlasting night stone' I had known of was an existence that was the complete antithesis of the word 'fool'.』

『It is terrifyingly intelligent; all of its actions are calculated and borne purely from malice.』

『Its actions are always shaped by calculated malice.』

『If it failed once, it would spread malice elsewhere once more.』

…..Say.

If---that's right, it was a question of 'if'.

The fact that I met Yoishi Mitsurugi one year ago in that family restaurant.

The fact that I alone coincidentally happened to run into 'Yoishi' by

accident after the ‘Ikaigabuchi’ offline meeting.

If, that wasn’t an accident….what would happen?

No, what if everything began long before that, the day I lost my mother? What if Yoishi becoming involved in the resolution, and even how Krishna-san linked it by saying, ‘From its start, it never had any malice’, was not an accident….?

Having met Yoishi, and feeling a debt of gratitude towards her—

Didn’t I end up feeling romance for ghosts? I became attracted to the scenery of the world beyond, and began to excitedly venture into the spirt world, and jumped into the flames of darkness with glee, like a moth that knows that it is not a place a living person can deal with, but jumps into the flames and gets burned. And, before I’d realized, that continued to chip away at the thread of my spirit, gradually thinning my connection to this world and leading me straight to hell. Meeting Krishna-san, meeting Sako, and even meeting Takamura--- What if all those encounters were calculated by someone else, and they transformed the unknown realm of the occult into something fascinating one step before I rejected it? And what if it that was something that foolishly made me think that I could, or rather, that I had to save the young girl known as Yoishi Mitsurugi?

In the world that was being painted pitch black—I pictured her lonely face.

『Next time, if we meet again-- I’ll become your friend.』

『if you intend to associate with this person any longer, I won’t show you mercy.』

『That person probably won’t betray me to a fearsome degree.』

Eleven years ago, the ‘everlasting night stone’ failed to destroy

Yoishi's heart, Sako said that it had been stitched to Yoishi because she took the name of 'Yoishi' herself. But that wasn't it--- not at all.

Wasn't the 'everlasting night stone' patiently waiting for someone to appear for eleven years?

Could the occult loving university student: Nagito Yamada, possibly be—

An existence created only for the girl whose heart failed to be crushed, to grow in her the heart to 'Trust people' once more?

……..A……

"ARGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

I realized that thundering scream was my own.

Someone who Yoishi trusted.

Someone who Yoishi acknowledged as a 'friend'.

Then, one after the other, it would sow the seeds that would lead to that someone and Yoishi deepening their connection, and when they mutually acknowledged each other as 'war comrades', it would destroy that someone.

Possessing Krishna-san, destroying Sako—was it all to destroy Nagito Yamada into smithereens in front of Yoishi? After she barely escaped being crushed eleven years ago, it planned to crush the faintest hope budding in her heart in the most ruthless way imaginable – and would finally be able to incarnate Yoishi's body at long last?

A fear pierced through my entire being, as if I faced the thing that killed me in a past life—and I, pissed myself disgracefully.

“……Hey…. scared?”

At that moment—

A familiar voice like a ringing bell reached my ears.

--Everything… is in reverse.

Next to me, the young girl who had lost her emotions sneered.

With long black hair that gently waved, a monster was there with a pale face and dark colored eyes.

The scenery I once saw,

The ghost stories I had once read.

Among them must have been illusions in my mind created by fear.

Before I realized, there was a staircase behind me. On the landing of the staircase was a middle-aged man in a gray, worn suit, staring at me with a hollow expression. Under the bed was a woman with a white face, and a bluish-white hand that sprouted from the dark mud wall. An old woman with clouded white eyes was leaning against my back, and countless white faces floated in the sky. Sinister words scrawled in an old book pointed to a graveyard that spread out all over, while a corpse that stood on the sea was connected to a pair of high heels placed behind a guard rail left by a woman laughing in the mountains. A broken doll turns into a wriggling thing at the water’s edge, the wheelchair of an abandoned hospital squeaks and squeals as it swirls and disappears into the sky, and the shiny thing in the tornado is an alien vehicle.

You don’t know what I’m talking about? Well neither do I. I was merely describing what I saw with my eyes, as my brain felt it. Aa—Ahh, that’s right. My mind must have been on the verge of breaking down. My head must have exceeded its allowed tolerance of fear. Up

until now, Krishna-san solved most things for me. More dangerous things were somehow managed by Sako. And Yoishi vaguely dealt with things I didn't quite understand. But, those were all events on a rail laid by an ancient entity acting through malice, and I was, according to expectation, according to plan, completely afraid, and with my collapse, Yoishi too would collapse, auspiciously allowing Yoishi to transform into the 'everlasting night stone'. The cackling and sneering black haired young girl next to me was that.

Which meant that, everything was already---

Over---

--When.

….No.

….Wait a minute…..

If Yoishi was already broken, and ended up turning into the 'everlasting night stone'….then... What of me who was thinking right now? Did being broken mean only this much? Were these the last few normal thoughts that remined in my illogical self-consciousness? I didn't know, but what were these thoughts that I was still thinking and feeling anyway?

Those vague doubts—

Changed the scenery in an instant.

They continued to clear away the darkness, and slowly returned my vision back to the original world.

I was still standing still in the storage room, and in front of me was Krishna-san who lay collapsed, and a bloodstained Sako. And next to me was Yoishi, dumbfounded, her empty gaze wandering at midair. There was no sign of the 'everlasting night stone' anywhere in the dim, dark and cramped room.

“…..Yoishi.”

I reached out my wobbly hand, gripped her hand, and spoke.

“….C, can you walk?”

Yoishi looked at me in a daze, and shook her head thereafter.

“….Come on, just walk. Let’s get out of here… let’s go outside, and call for help. If we call for an ambulance, Sako might still be--”

“—It’s impossible.”

Yoishi spoke with an expression that was clear, and heartrendingly painful.

At that moment, I noticed it.

Next to Yoishi, a white haze hung over.

There were four mists there, as if they enveloped Yoishi. And in my retinas, they gradually formed some kind of shape—and stood silently as if encompassing Yoishi. I quickly understood that it was people for some reason. And, I had an intuition that I knew these people. It felt as if I had once, somewhere, watched over them as if they were my real family…but, ahh, I knew it, I’ve started to collapse again. I realized that fact somewhere in my consciousness, but I still couldn’t do anything to stop it.

That was because—

I could now see a gentlemanly gray-haired man next to Yoishi. Next to him, I saw was a cheerful woman, a tomboyish girl with a smile on her face, and a cute brown dog at her feet. As they gradually took form, my vision gradually blurred. And those words spontaneously came from my mouth.

--I’m sorry……

I felt an overwhelming regret and fell to my knees on the spot. If I had only—if I had only been a little bit smarter. If I could have done something a little better. The feeling of cursing myself for my

helplessness continued to well up inside me. I wiped away the tears that overflowed, and raised my head—

"……"

I saw what looked like a straw rope fastened around the man's neck. Looking closely at the mother, I saw that her body was dismembered. The girl had a knife still stuck at the base of her throat, and the small dog's stomach was split open, its entrails fallen out. Yet despite that, the four hazy figures that had taken form remained standing, as if they enveloped Yoishi.

…..Are…. they ghosts?

At last, was I-- seeing the ghosts I had once longed to see so much?

And I realized what an unbelievably sad thing they were. Ghosts were in no way a thing to be feared. They were not something terrifying. They were completely and utterly heartbreaking things. Unable to be seen, unable to speak, they are just there. And, just seeing Yoishi Mitsurugi at ease surrounded by those ghosts evoked a pain that was enough to split my heart into two.

As the tears flowed without end from my eyes--my right elbow suddenly tinged in pain. And that ache seemed to ache in and out as it grew more painful. It became an unbearable pain, and I finally realized that it was a furious rebuke. It felt as if I heard Karasu-san's voice right by my ear.

"….Don't….give up yet… Think…"

I wiped away my tears, and at the same time I gritted my teeth, frantically encouraged my brain.

In the boundary between reality and fiction, between this world and the world beyond, I still mobilized my full consciousness to think.

The reason I came here…The meaning of why Sako made me come here.

Wasn't I yet to find out why that was?

Think, think. Think until your mind is scorched, me. Sako said, 『'Names' in this world hold the meaning of 'place'』, and Krishna-san had said, 『To wear the W in witch, would ultimately mean to forget who you are』. Which meant that regaining one's original name was supposed to erase the worn 'W'—no, was it the other way around….? That's right….When she christened herself as 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' and bound the 'everlasting night stone', wasn't she herself was bound at the same time?

Didn't she end up defined as a dweller of this world and the world beyond?

"So that means I need to find her real name after all--"

In my cloudy consciousness, I told Yoishi, "Stay there", and ran out.

I mustered all my remaining strength, ran through the corridor, and jumped into the living room.

It was possible—that Yoishi's true name was written down on something in this mansion.

I went to the kitchen and turned over the cups. For example, I thought that there would be cups for each of the family members, and a young Yoishi would have her name inscribed on that—but there was nothing there. 'All that remains is', I turned to face the hearth. On top of it was the polaroid photograph taken of the family. It was creepy that the other family members who died had their faces warped white somehow, but I slowly drew close to that photograph.

In old family photographs, there would be stuff like dates and names of the people in the photo written on the back. That was how it was for my family. So maybe this one was the same. That must have been the reason why Sako made me come all the way here. I'm sure Yoishi's true name is there. It had to be. I would find that, and tell it to her; She, who ended up losing her place in the boundary between this world and the world beyond. I would declare to her with all my strength that she was a dweller of this world.

I placed my hand on the photograph, suppressing my throbbing heartbeat and rushing emotions.

But, as I was about to slowly lift it up—

I suddenly felt weak.

What if it wasn't here…..? No, no, it had to be here.

After all, if it wasn't here… then there would be nowhere else to search in this mansion. Believe it….it, must be there.

I took a deep breath.

And the moment I flipped over the photograph.

--
*Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek**Kek*… The mansion rang.

The sneering laughter of a manly voice coldly pierced me, and flooded inside me.

Reflected in my eyes, there was nothing in the back of the photograph.

I couldn't even see a stain in the blank space that had turned yellow —

And the world dyed in darkness in an instant.

○

Dark.

Darkness.

A dark world—no matter where you looked.

How much darkness did this world have, and how many colors of ‘black’ did it have…?

It felt as if I had seen a lot of ‘black’ in this one year.

Enough ‘black’ to stop my thoughts.

Enough ‘black’ that seemed to suck me in forever.

And, enough ‘black’ that seemingly melted my body and thoughts in it.

But the ‘black’ that now spread before my eyes was different from all of them.

To put it ostentatiously, the ‘black’ that was the primordial of this world, where nothing else existed yet—that might have been how it felt. But, there was a strange calmness and tranquility. A boundless ‘black’, as if I was in space, in what must have once had countless planets. It truly made me feel at ease. I didn't have to suffer anymore, and I didn't have to think about anything anymore—

「Did you have fun?」

Suddenly, I heard a low voice from somewhere. I didn’t know who it was, but it wasn’t fun at all, I answered.

「Isn’t hiding behind people, and tricking people so much fun?」

I was asked that once again, and I answered that it was just you.

But the truth is—from somewhere in my heart, I ended up thinking that it might have been a bit fun. If you were to trick someone with ease, if you were to continue tricking them for the rest of my life, then that might have indeed been a bit necessary. For example, say there was someone not really blessed with singing skills, yet they can’t help but sing because they love it, and you’d tell them for the fun of it, “You’re really talented”. They would be so happy and delighted, innocently believe those words and keeps on singing. People would laugh behind their back, but still that person would

willingly believe it, and continue to sing willingly. They would willingly mistake people's laughter as being happy at their singing. But here's what I think. Is a song that continues to be willingly sung for the sake of others, even if it lacks talent, truly worthless? Does the pure feeling of love not reside in the song? Certainly, the first words may have been malicious. However, that which began as malice might be overturned by pure feelings, and might one day become the real thing?

「Then, let's play a trick.」

The low voice spoke once more.

'In this world, there are only those who dance and those who make others dance to their tune, and if one were to play the part of those who play the tune—if they were to learn the joy of playing the flute, then there would be no going back', the voice spoke.

'Ah, I see. That may be true', I thought.

But, I---

I knew the joy of dancing, after all. I was always on the dancing side in the festivals in my hometown. I would empty my heart and match my movements with the people around me. The pleasure of synchronizing with others made me want to raise my voice in joy. When our eyes met, we would laugh at each other, and before I realized, I would be thankful for the friends I had. Under this vast, endless night sky, I would be thankful I had friends who laughed at the same things, and who were saddened at the same things. To trick such friends would surely pain my heart. I don't think I would want to be on the side of those who play tricks, even if I were the one who was tricked.

'Then I ask you', the voice asked.

Do you think parents would happily give birth to a child, if they knew in advance that the child would be born handicapped? If they found out that the child was handicapped after birth, would the parents be able to love that child normally?

That was…

That was a difficult question.

Antitrypsin deficiency—I was born with that kind of body, and suffered from infantile asthma, and ended up causing a lot of trouble and worry to my parents and the people around me. Why was I alone born with such a body? When I was a child, I often wondered when I used to cry all by myself in the corner of the room. Knowing that pain, if I were asked whether I would give birth to a handicapped child… I think I would indeed hesitate to death.

In response, 'Right?', the voice said.

In times like that, to be completely tricked would be merciful. To abort the child, or to be told that it's a lovely child even with the handicap. People do not act until there is a reward in front of them. They can't even move their feet forward unless they have a feeling that there is something fun ahead. It's mere hypocrisy to continue doing bitter things that will only continue to get worse, right? Or they're narcissists who love themselves for trying.

Is that so….?

Was my mother like that as well….?

'Obviously', answers the voice.

「They really love themselves for trying. They are drunk on it. If that wasn't the case, could she have taken care of your labored breathing be it mealtime or the middle of the night?」

….Is that so….? No…. That might have been the case.

'Hey, tell me', the voice said. 'How many lives do you think are abandoned each year by those who are not ready to be parents? How many reported cases of parents killing their own children? A parent is nothing more than a title, a temporary designation. Everyone is just an animal that thinks first and foremost of their own happiness. Why should I have to raise a child I do not love? Why do I have to raise them even as they chip away against my time, my soul? Is it social responsibility? What you would call moral responsibility? Say, just

what is society? Isn't something like that nothing more than a system to reduce quarrels as much as possible? No matter how, and no matter how many lids you put on it, problems will always continue to happen. That is your history, problems happen by default. To accept that and to live, what is wrong with that? If that's the case—wouldn't it be smarter to be on the side that causes the problems?'

I…could understand that.

Human history is filled with problems, and even after all this time, the problems have only increased.

I know that there were as many definitions of parenthood as there were parents. And I know that there are broken parents in this world who have never even thought of the concept of parenthood. But—despite that, there is still one act that every parent definitely does for their child. That is: to give them a name filled with all their hopes and wishes, right? Isn't that—why names are so precious?

Ahahahahahahahahahaha! The voice suddenly burst into laughter.

'Don't tell me you didn't know. How many parents do you think are out there who give their children names that inspire neither hopes nor dreams? How many names do you think there are that have nothing but the malice of their parents? Hey, can you really turn a blind eye to that? You might say that it would be fine if you change your name once you become an adult? No, It's useless. No matter how much you try to forget the name you've been christened with once, it will definitely be bound to you in some shape or form for the rest of your life. That is the curse of a name. You heard it too, didn't you? She was cursed before she was born. A life born by the violation of her mother by brats abroad! She was never wanted, not in the least! Once born, the event they'd rather have forgotten takes a form that haunts them for the rest of their lives. There's no way she would ever be wanted!'

I was-- at a loss of words in the end, with no rebuttal.

In this mansion….I thought I would try to learn her true name. I thought that if she were to at least reclaim her rightful name, the 'W' that coiled around her would be exorcised. But right now, to be

honest….I was afraid. I was afraid to discover her true name.

If, by some chance, there was no feeling of hopes or dreams in it, and was instead a thing filled with malice, then what? What if her endless pain and torment continued the moment she took back her true name? There have been so many things done with good intentions that push people into distress. How could I say that I wasn't making the same mistake right now? Moreover, Sako had said that she took the name of 'Yoishi' to bind the 'everlasting night stone', but….what if that wasn't the case, and she instead took it because she actually detested her true name?

Thereupon…a thought suddenly came to mind.

Couldn't she stay as 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' as she had up until now?

That would mean she would still have that callous, Noh-faced father as a guardian in name only, not have a place at home where she belonged, would keep going around haunted places where her eyes would glow, would throw up at times, and would complicate complicated matters even further, but—even so, that wasn't the worst outcome, right? I would be there, and Krishna-san too, as well as everybody in 'Ikaigabuchi'. If she at least opened her heart properly, she could lead a fun occult life. There would be no need to remind her that she was born cursed and undesired—

At that moment, I suddenly realized.

Could it be, the thing Sako spoke of, 『You will be compelled to make a choice』…

And, the thing Takako Takamura spoke of, 『You'll be forced to make the final choice』, it was—

About this…?

If she were to regain her true name, she would arrive in this world while still having the scent of the world beyond.

If she were to remain as Yoishi Mitsurugi, she would live in the world

beyond while remaining in this world.

…What…should I do?

The world continued to grow darker. The darkness continued to silently spread out.

As if the ground beneath my feet were filled by dark colored water, I eventually came to believe that there was only one answer.

「I want… to stay with her like this forever.」

「I want to be together with Yoishi Mitsurugi.」

Right, I was about to say it out loud.

When the wound on my right elbow, throbbed with pain once more.

The pain kept repeating like a drum being beaten and became a rhythm as it throbbed and throbbed.

Definite sounds that formed words. They became a rhythm, and made me remember what Karasu-san had once said.

---Yes, deep breaths.

When I came to… I saw that Karasu-san was there, with that nostalgic smile of hers.

Her lustrous black hair dangled down to her cheeks, and she was leaning close to me crouched down, as if she were peering inside me.

--Take a dee—ep breath in, then hold. Yes, slowly let it out--- Repeat that three times.

My vision blurred with tears at those cheerful words that were out of

place.

And, before long, I repeated my breathing as I was told. I breathed, and exhaled. I exhaled as much as I could, and inhaled as much as I could.

『You'd better remember.』

『Your fear most likely comes from forgetting to breathe.』

『If the fear inside you intensifies, then like now, make sure you're breathing properly.』

『No matter what kind of paranormal lies ahead of you, you'll definitely make it through somehow.』

'But', I spoke. Despite that, I still don't know if I'm supposed to find Yoishi's true name. I end up thinking that it's better not to find it.

—Eh? I think you already have the answer to that.

I was surprised I was somehow able to carry on a conversation with Karasu-san from my memories—

However, as if clinging to that, I added a question, "What do you mean?"

--After all, the two of us… in the world we peeked at in those hellish days. Didn't you decide that you would bring that back with you? After having gone through so much, being unable to do anything but witness the cruel destruction of a family, there was still something you desperately brought back with you, right?

Brought back……? I did? What……?

--It should be firmly engraved on you, Nagi-kun.

--It should be engraved on your soul.

Despite that, I still didn't know, and was in dismay, when….

Exasperated, Karasu-san's voice echoed kindly for one last time.

---Then, I'll do it one last time.

--**Throb**

My right elbow ached once more.

--*Throb*, *throb*, *throb*…. That throbbing continued to grow stronger.

It was as if— my adult-self was tired of searching, and my child-self pointed it out to me with a smile, and the warmth and stimulation grew.

"…Ah….ahhhhh."

In an instant, I was struck by lightning together and a terrible sound rang inside me, with the light running through me.

Goosebumps ran through every cell in my body, an unspecialized base sequence in the genome that was called junk, awoke. As if guided by something, it synthesized in succession, and began to build that hidden meaning.

The hanging mansion that manifested in my vision.

The old and grubby living room. The dusty counter.

As I regained reality with my right eye, a different timeline of the

same place was synchronized as white hazy scenery in my left eye.

Appearing hazily—as if gliding in midair, that scenery continued to flow through me.

Before I realized, I was running.

--It can't be….it can't be.

I ran to the front door with enough force that I almost fell down, and looked at my reflection in the full-length mirror that was there.

I rolled up my shirt, uncovered my right elbow, and—saw it through the mirror.

What I thought was an ugly scar that did not heal for a long time, was not a scar at all.

I thought it had ended up becoming a bruise, but it was not a bruise.

『Miko Hanamura』

The bruise that was inverted in the mirror—

Had been engraved on my skin, in letters.

In an instant, the scenery I had once seen somewhere with my left eye transformed into a torrent and rushed into my brain. The amount of information was so vast and extreme that it could not be processed by my brain specifications— it flowed past me from one scene to the next, with no time to recognize it. Even so, I was still able to burn several scenes in my mind. Among the endless flashes, a fatherly figure laughed as he held a baby in his arms. A motherly figure cried as she embraced a toddler. A tomboyish young girl who looked like a middle schooler laughed as she pulled the hand of a girl with black hair and fair skin. The baby, the toddler, the fair skinned young girl —I recognized all of them as 『Miko Hanamura』. Without a doubt,

at every moment, 『Miko Hanamura』 was loved.

“…….Ah.”

Before I realized, I was in the hanging mansion, but something was different.

It was not a dusty, cobwebbed ruin. It was a clean, brand new mountain retreat with the light of the sunlight shining in.

Feeling dazzled, I continued to the living room in a daze. I heard lots of laughter coming from the nearby garden. I opened the sash and stepped out to the garden—to see a family so happy they were clad in light. In front of the barbecue was a gentle looking man, a bright woman and a cheery young girl….and, Miko Hanamura who was a child. Miko had a kind, delighted smile on her face.

“—Miko.”

I called her name.

“You…were called Miko Hanamura?”

In response, the beautiful black haired young girl with fair skin looked in my direction. It felt like we met eye to eye after a long time, after a truly long time. I was so overjoyed, so relieved, that tears gradually swelled up and began to spill.

“Miko, let’s go back.”

I reached out my hand to her, and the young girl opened her eyes wide in surprise.

She slowly took one look back, looked back at me and shook her head.

“Miko, listen to me. This place—it’s not here anymore. It’s a world that doesn’t exist anymore.”

But, a young girl drew close next to Miko, and gripped her hand. For some reason, I knew that girl’s name was ‘Kii-chan’. She looked at me with a fierce expression, as if to say she wouldn’t let her precious best

friend go anywhere.

Behind them, the father was smiling. The mother gently put her hand on Miko's shoulder. The elder sister took one step ahead with her eyebrows raised as if to protect her younger sister from me. The dog at Miko's feet growled at me.

Looking at that—

A gentle whisper escaped my lips, 'I see.'

And, as I was tossed around mercilessly by the warm feelings that swept over, I declared.

"….I'm glad….You were really…loved after all."

"…Yeah."

"Miko—that's a really nice name."

The tears continued to spill.

"If I remember correctly... the word『Mi彌』means the『light that shines universally』in Buddhism." "…Is, that right?"

"Yeah. I know someone who knows a lot about that stuff, so there's no doubt about it. That's why…that's why."

My voice trembled with tears, but I desperately managed to squeeze it out.

"I'm sure that the person who gave you that name wished to maintain a relationship with you forever. Regardless of how you were born, they wished that connection would last for all of eternity."

"…..Yeah."

"…So, listen up."

I wiped away the tears, and raised my voice as best as I could.

"You are in no way cursed. You're not abhorred by anyone. Being cursed—is just being lost on the inside. So… let's go back. This place

is no longer here."

"….But."

Miko smiled once at Kii-chan, before letting go of her hand and took a step towards me, and spoke.

"I feel comfortable here; I think it's the place I belong. Papa, mama, onee-chan, Kii-chan, Leo—and even Mr. Inspector is here."

Hearing that, I looked towards the back, to see a somewhat nostalgic man with gray hair and a smile on his face.

Her father, mother, older sister, best friend and pet dog—everyone was smiling, and stood behind Miko as if protecting her. Then, I heard a click behind me. I turned around to see Sako in a gray, dull, worn-out suit, taking a picture with an old polaroid camera. He then took out the photo, and handed me the photograph that was exposed to the light.

The photograph must have been the original photograph placed atop the hearth in the real 'hanging mansion' earlier. However, the faces of the family had no longer disappeared. The faces that had been stretched and twisted in white in midair were now beautifully cropped, with the smiling faces in front of me.

"……..I see."

I muttered once more.

It felt as if I had been listening to someone's sneering laughter echo all this time—

I had even realized that it belonged to the 'everlasting night stone', but I thought there was nothing I could do.

I understood that Miko would be swallowed by the world beyond if this continued. But, there was nothing someone like me could do. To tear away Miko away from this warm world, was something—I couldn't do.

And that's when it happened.

I noticed something emerging in the photograph.

The polaroid photograph still hadn't been fully sensitized. Her father, mother, elder sister and Miko were smiling kindly, and the dog at their feet looked happy as well. But—there was something else there. On Miko's left end, a white haze emerged, which should not have been in the picture. As if to embrace a young Miko, that white haze gradually continued exposing---and eventually, took on an impossible form.

….Ahh.

At that moment, I realized the true reason why I came here.

I realized the meaning of the vast swirl of information that came surging into my head.

I realized why Sako had called me to this mansion—and why he handed me this photograph just now.

In the picture that transcended generations—

Nagito Yamada stood there, as if protecting Miko Hanamura.

The figure that decided to stand by her side no matter what cruel reality he had to face, was as if looking in the mirror at a different me. For the first time, I felt pride at myself—it made me feel a sublime will. The answer to the question posed to me earlier in the darkness welled up in my chest as I saw my own face. An answer to the voice that said, 'It's mere hypocrisy to continue doing bitter things that will only continue to get worse, right?' I lost sight of myself since I was asked that question, but--

No, there is one more impetus that drives people forward.

There was something else in this world that wasn't just greed, reward, or narcissism.

"—I got it, Miko."

The meaning of the scenery that swirled round and round my head, continued to dissolve. The me of eleven years ago and the me of the present dissolved and merged. I was thankful for that fate and spoke the answer that I extracted from my soul, without any doubts.

“Then, I’ll stay here as well.”

Miko looked at me again with a start.

“I will never leave you to die again. I won’t stand by and let you go through something like that again.”

“……”

“Why, you ask? Because you were the first person to call me a friend. Even when I was adrift in the sea of endless despair with nowhere to go, you gave me a place to stay.”

“……A.”

“Although my email got garbled midway through.”

“……A…aaaa…..”

“I told you, didn’t I? That I would definitely protect you.”

“Yes, I was Mr. Frog back then.”

The moment I declared those words.

The sky roared, and split apart.

Somewhere, it felt as if I heard an ear-splitting scream.

At the same time, a series of low rumbling sounds reverberated deep beneath my feet, and eventually turned into subterranean rumbling that overlapped with the beating of my heart. My teeth were rattling so hard I couldn’t breathe. And I understood that I had broken a rule established by a great, great being in a far higher dimension. This

might be the end for me as well—but I was prepared for that.

Why was it….? Ah, dammit, I had tried to show off and ended up saying that, but as usual my teeth were clattering, and my legs were trembling on the verge of collapse. After all this time, I realized that I was the guy with the stinky pants who had pissed himself earlier. And, the place I stood was the ruins of a mountain retreat that was now called the hanging mansion—I was in front of the hearth, and I found that the one in front of me was the Yoishi Mitsurugi of the present---no, I knew she was Miko Hanamura.

The high school girl with porcelain-white skin, long black hair swaying in the air, and dressed in the funeral-like uniform of the Koumei Institute, was merely trembling.

In her vacant eyes, countless paranormal events were now swirling around. The hundreds, the thousands of paranormal events she had experienced in the past --- no, if you were to include the ones she had read on the internet or in books then it would be in the tens of thousands. Therein, was the horror she should have truly felt. Those emotions she had become numb to, which had been stored somewhere in her brain, were all surging into Miko's small forehead all at once.

"…This…is the feeling of fear….."

The irises of her eyes shook, welled up, and a trickle of tears spilled down.

"It's disturbing… not knowing…. not being able to explain….it's just…just….disturbing…."

I nodded.

"….I'm alive….I…am alive…."

Miko covered her face with both hands. At that moment, something she must have held back for a long, long, eternity, finally broke free.

Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan, all her emotions broke free, and she cried out. Her voice was like that of a newborn, defenseless baby. I held her slender body close to me, as if to protect

the pure soul that had just been born into this cruel world. I hugged her tightly, as if to show that to the pure malice that I could not see, which might have still been nearby.

“….I’m alive….I am… alive….”

“….Yes. You are truly alive. And you should keep on living step by step. Live as long as you can for the ones who have gone before you

—”

And after that you can die in peace—I was about to say that.

“……..I’m scared.”

Miko whispered in my chest.

“I’m scared to go on living…the countless paranormal things are scary as well…the voice in the wall, the smiling dolls, shadows in the reflection, the person with only legs, the man in the gutter, the will - o’-the-wisp, the box in the storehouse, people disappearing in the sky —in this---in such a scary world….how did you live this far….how should I live…?”

“Hahaha.”

I couldn't help but laugh. I felt like I could finally talk with her about the real paranormal things. It felt like I could teach her that while some ghost stories circulating this world were really dangerous, they were also full of romance and mysterious charm.

When—at that moment.

I thought the ground still felt like it was shaking because I was a coward, or because I was embracing a high school girl, but…. I realized that it was neither of those things.

“H….heyy, Yoi….no, Miko!”

I yelled seeing the creaking wall swell up and down.

“It’s an earthquake! Shit, it’s a big one.”

The building slowly swayed from side to side, and eventually began to rattle and shake little by little.

“Run away, Miko! This run-down building is dangerous. I’ll get Krishna-san.”

After saying that, I pushed Miko, whose face was still soggy in tears, toward the direction of the front door, and then staggered and

swayed as I ran down the corridor. At the back of the corridor, the storage room floor was covered entirely with Sako's blood. I bowed my head once to Sako who had already passed away, "I'm sorry", and lifted Krishna-san's body, who lay collapsed and unconscious, and carried her on my shoulder. I then furiously rushed toward the front door. The shaking quickly grew even more violent, and I staggered and hit the wall, but still clenched my teeth as I broke through the front door and jumped outside. I slowly laid Krishna-san a little further away from the building, and gasped.

There was no one in my surroundings.

Miko, who should have left the building before me, was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey…Miko!"

I called out at the top of my voice, but there was no reply.

The shaking grew even more ferocious, and I understood that the building would completely flatten. I clicked my tongue once, left Krishna-san there and jumped back inside the building. "Miko!" As I yelled, I looked around and saw that she was in a daze in the living room.

"Hey, what are you doing! Get out of here!"

The moment I ran up to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, I realized that Miko was staring at that photograph in front of the hearth.

"The first picture… the two of us took together."

"Well, that's true but."

"But…you were a ghost."

"Shut it, let's go, if you wanna take that photo then hurry up and do it!"

I called out to Miko who had been standing motionless in front of the photograph for who knows how long, when it happened.

A terrible *creeeeeak* rang out, and the building bent. It felt as if a giant hand grasped the building from the outside, and at the same time— a sound like a low male voice reverberated throughout the building.

--*Gigigigigigigigigigigigi*

It was as if it were a sneering voice—as if it were a wailing voice.

Together with that detestable sound, the beams of the ceiling twisted to an absurd degree. Dust was rising and falling down like rain. There were five of them— they felt like giant fingers of something. From the depths of darkness—a malice-stained, corrupted hand reached out from the depths of this world called hell.

Give her back.

It reached straight for Miko—

“Don’t fucking mess with me.”

I howled.

“I will never let go again. She is a fragment of my soul. And, my--”

I yelled a scream that would not lose to the thunderous roar of the collapsing beams.

“My precious wife!”

In an instant—

My vision muddled white, and a sharp stinging pain ran down my shoulders. It was as if, I knew the building would collapse all at once, like in the Fafrotskies phenomenon. I instantly covered Miko’s body to protect her from the falling debris of the building. One after another, building material fell on my back, biting into my skin, and crushing my bones. In the midst of the sound that split my ears— it seemed to me as if I had been caught in the hand of the ‘everlasting night stone’.

“L-let go.”

The world continued to darken.

The faint hope was fading away.

The moment I screamed in the midst of overwhelming despair that filled my heart.

“Ayana Takamura.”

Under my arms, Miko Hanamura roared her last lines as “Yoishi Mitsurugi”.

“You’re there, aren’t you?”

At that moment, somewhere far above in the sky, something opened its eyes.

“I’ll give you the best thing you wished for.”

“’Yoishi’ called out to those eyes.

“So-- don’t ever come close to this person, ever again.”

《OK》

That must have been the last illusion I saw in my fading consciousness.

Ayana Takamura’s giant head that appeared from the void—

--*Crunch*, it ate something.

And in the world that had grown dark once more, those clear, boyish words echoed through the air.

“The fear held by the root of fear or something ---it was truly a delicious meal.”

○

In the silent, pitch-black rubble—

After finishing the long, endless story, she might have finally remembered everything.

Yoishi Mitsurugi, or rather, Miko Hanamura muttered,
“…..Right….yeah…that’s right….”

“Did you remember?”

I managed to reply with that somehow as I put up with the pain in my immobile body.

But I felt somewhat embarrassed, even though I only talked about what happened just a while ago, about what might have been the biggest occultic thing to happen in my life, I ended up talking about it all the way to when I declared her my ‘wife’. For a while, we were both silent in the darkness.

“…You, really.”

“…….Hm?”

I thought she might have been embarrassed in her own way—

“….are a fool.”

She said so in his usual tone,

“S, shut up, jerk.”

I retorted in an instant, but I felt embarrassed once more, and was unable to say anything after that.

Darkness and silence fell once more, and I noticed that the pain was slowly getting worse. I slowly wiped the sweat off my forehead while trying to hide it from Miko, and clenched my teeth to endure the pain.

Thereupon, Miko muttered something to me.

“Back then—”

“…..Eh?”

“I understood how ghosts felt. When you were delirious in the hospital room, when you had your cognition of me sealed away.”

“….A, ahh.”

“To exist there and to not be recognized—it’s an unbelievable darkness.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“….It was so dark. Pitch black darkness so awful… that it might be the most terrible darkness there is.”

“…I said I’m sorry.”

“……But.”

“…….”

“But if you hadn’t protected been in that way—you would have fallen apart. And perhaps my heart wouldn't have lasted either. In that sense…it might be something to be thankful for.”

“…….”

It was thanks to Krishna-san, and Sako. Come to think of it, Sako was…crushed underneath, huh? What about Krishna-san? I placed her a little further away from the building, but was she alright? As I thought such things, it suddenly felt like my head became misty white. I was still lying down, but I felt terribly dizzy as if had lost my sense of equilibrium.

--Damn, could this be….dehydration? Or an infection from the wounds in my legs, back or head. Dammit, the more I thought about it, the more anxious I got. In times like these, the worst thing to do would be to lose hope.

I thought that, but the only one who knew we were here was Sako, and unless Krishna-san, who was lying outside, didn't regain consciousness safely and instantly grasp hold of the situation and call for help, then there was no hope for us. This was terrible. We finally managed to get rid of the ridiculously dangerous monster that scattered malice for so long, but our chances of survival were infinitesimally small.

"H-hey, Miko, try to smile."

Impatient, I made that absurd request towards the other side of the darkness. And what came back to me in reply was a voice with a deep-seated reluctance, "Ehh?"

"Come on, I'm begging you."

"Even if I were to smile in a place like this, you can't see it."

"Well, that's true, but—no, just try it! Smile for me. I'm scared. I'm so pathetic I can't help it, but I'm scared. If I were to be cheered up somehow…right, if I don't see your smile, then I'm going to lose heart. Look, listen up. A smile is more precious than anything else in this world. Nothing bad happens to a person who is smiling happily. A nice smile is a present that will make everyone happy. So, please. My hopes are fading, so give me the best smile you can as a present! I'm begging you!"

In response, Miko kept silent for a while and spoke.

"……..Ah…..so that's how it was…."

"……Eh?"

"Perhaps it was the same for 'Gandame'."

"…Ga, Gandame…?"

“’Gandame’ and ‘Yousen-boy’… they might have been trying to deliver us hope. Ghosts, yōkai, monsters and everything else simply existed. They simply existed—but the moment humans feared them, they might have turned into monsters.”

My impassioned speech took a strange turn, and I was about to give up.

“…..I’ll try to….smile.”

Suddenly, Miko agreed.

“…I don’t know if you’ll be happy though.”

“Ohh, really?”

“…….”

“…..Hey, did you smile already?”

“……”

“…Is it alright…if I can feel it?”

In my vague consciousness, I bumped my trembling hand against the wood here and there—and slowly reached out my hand. I reached out my arm in the direction of the voice, towards Miko’s cheeks. My fingertips touched something soft—

It happened at that moment.

Heeeeeeeey, I heard a person’s voice from somewhere.

For a moment, it was a voice so faint I thought it might have been an auditory hallucination—but, I definitely felt like I heard it.

I strained my ears,

“……Heyyyyyyyy, is anyone alive?!”

It was the voice of a man I didn’t recognize. And it was followed by the voice of a different man, “Make a voice, or even a sound! If you can make it, then do it!” I desperately twisted my head to face up,

and I saw a flicker of light in between the gaps of the timber somewhere.

Ohh, my hopes skyrocketed in an instant.

“….Over here! We’re over here! We’re alive! We’re alive!!”

I desperately raised my voice, and instantly a huge amount of dust invaded my throat, and I coughed violently.

But, there were shouts of joy right near me, “Oooohh!”, “This way!”, it felt as if the sound of several footsteps drew closer.

In my fading consciousness—the roof and lumber were being moved aside one by one. The air suddenly began to move, and thick oxygen brushed against my nostrils. The light began to pour down on me, which must have been the flashlights of the rescue team. As I was illuminated by that light—I saw it. Just fifty centimeters or so away from me, I saw a face so beautiful and lovely that she felt out of this world.

Miko Hanamura was looking kindly at me with clear eyes that had lost their dark color.

“…Miko.”

The moment I spoke her name in embarrassment, the last piece of timber imprisoning us was removed. The rescue team clad in orange lifted it up with their thick arms.

“Are you alright? Are you conscious? Your wounds?”

I was asked in rapid succession, but I guess he knew right away.

“Lacerations on the left leg! This is terrible---Ah, large abrasions on the back and the arms …get a stretcher right away!”

--Hey, hey, don’t scare me now.

I mean, I'm going to cause my sister and the others to worry again, as I thought that, I spotted the adorable baby face beyond the rescue team. Her hair was a little disheveled, but the petite former occult

site manager was looking my way with tears filled in her eyes.

“Ah, thanks.”

Foolish thought it might have been, that was all the greeting I could muster.

I then turned to look at Miko who was right below me. I was about to smile at her, to tell her that we had been saved, but-

Thereupon, I realized that Miko was slightly out of position from where I was. In her right hand, she clutched the stuffed frog as if to protect it, and in her left hand, she clutched that polaroid photograph. It seemed she had almost let go of them when the ceiling collapsed, but desperately shifted her body to take them back. No, I understood that much, but.

“…Hey, Miko, what is that?”

I asked, suddenly noticing a strange foreign object.

I stared at that strange object, and vaguely thought about its meaning.

It was—the sharp, pointed fragment of a broken pillar.

And, right now, it was growing like an object from Miko Hanamura’s chest.

“Hey…Miko….”

I asked her once more, when the rescue team pulled me out in a hurry, and shifted their attention to Miko.

“Wai…”

Wait a minute. Let me see her.

I wanted to say that, but my body ached all over, and no voice came out.

“CPR!! Hurry!!”

I heard that voice. Three members of the rescue party moved the timber, opened the hole even wider and pulled out Miko's body. They then placed her in the stretcher meant for me, carried her to a level ground a short distance away, where the paramedics there began to perform CPR on her.

"It's no good, Get the AED!"

Someone shouted that out loud, but an older paramedic stopped them.

With a somber look on his face, he gently shook his head and spoke.

"She—has already passed away."

"…It must have been an instant death. Judging from the liver mortis that's already set in, the time of death must have been around twenty-four hours ago…."

"….Inst….Twenty four hours….?"

I finally managed to let out a cry, and dragged my aching leg as I got up.

I dragged myself, and crawled towards Miko.

"Hey, there's no need for that… doing something foolish like that…."

The rescue team were looking at me. The rescue team in orange rushed up to me. They didn't know if they should help me, or stop me from walking, but I pushed back against them one after another, and reached Miko.

"What are you guys saying…. We were talking until just now. The two of us were trying our best not to lose against this darkness… We've been talking for the whole day, trying not to lose consciousness. Right?"

Before I'd realized, I was clutching the collar of the elder paramedic, when someone stopped me from behind.

"...Hey, I'm begging you, please…. Hurry up and help her! With that…with that machine right there! If you use that, then she'll surely regain consciousness, right? She'll be saved, right? If you can't do it, then take her to a hospital right away! Hurry up, hey!!"

"Stop it, Nagi-kun!"

I turned around hearing that scream, to see that the tearful voice belonged to Krishna-san—

I realized that it was her who was desperately clinging to me to try and stop me.

"Ah…Krishna-san…After all, it's strange, right? She…Miko was… until just now, telling me I was a fool, and she listened to me asking her to smile--"

I was about to say that.

I realized it for the first time.

Yoishi Mitsurugi—no, Miko Hanamura's face, was curved in a faint smile.

To me, it was as if she desperately tried to remember and recreate the smile she had almost forgotten—

I screamed a voiceless scream, as I embraced her.

Epilogue

It was a long tale—

This is the end of my recollections.

There might have been several things I might have forgotten to talk about, but at any rate, I tried to remember as much as I could in sequence, but—as expected, I end up thinking that it might have all been a dream.

The countless stories of wandering around the depths of the world beyond that began since encountering her—A world that shouldn't be seen.

"There are some things that are better not to know if you don't have to know them."

I was told that by a lot of people in the past. The story revolving the young girl known as 'Miko Hanamura', might have also been similar to that, but…in the end, I ended up knowing all of it. And, if you were to ask me if I regretted it, I would say no. She did her best to live at any moment, and I, who was close enough to catch her breath, was the same. Those countless strange, grotesque and hopeless adventures, even if you were to call them a taboo, the days in which I took them on, were even now—merely nostalgic.

The occult.

The realm of the inexplicable that's called a pseudoscience, and is mostly lies, delusions or misunderstandings. The world that would at times, fill you with romance, and at times strike you down to the depths of fear.

I would probably never step foot into its threshold ever again. Ah, it's not because I'm afraid. And it's also not because I no longer feel fear.

It's just—at the moment when this world and the world beyond intersect, when heaven and earth flip upside down, I will surely feel an overwhelming sense of loss at the absence of her whisper that was like a ringing bell.

Three months had already gone by—

Since the collapse of that mansion, and since Miko Hanamura's funeral.

The contents of the plastic tea bottle placed on the window danced to match the swaying of the train.

I gazed beyond the tea that glittered in the sunlight, towards the Pacific Ocean that dazzled even brighter in the sunlight—

"Just a little further to Fujieda."

I addressed the backpack placed on my knee, and then shifted my eyes once more to the scenery flowing outside the window.

I was now headed to my hometown of Fujieda by myself for summer vacation. My father, whom I had not seen for quite some time, had threatened to cut off the parent-child relationship if I did not return this summer, and for some reason, that miserly former delinquent of an older sister bore the full costs of my trip back to Fujieda, so as expected, I couldn't help but go back.

But, for me, going back to my parents' home was always a secondary thing, and my main purpose was something else.

『Are you going to do that no matter what?』

A few days ago, during lunch break—

Krishna-san asked me in the Beatnik Research Society Room in the western club building of the Koumei Institute.

『Yes. I've already made up my mind.』

I nodded, and Krishna-san merely hung her head in response, “I see.”

She then walked towards the bookshelf and turned around in front of the neatly arranged collection.

『Say, Nagi-kun. Do you know the origin of the word ‘Demon’?』

『…Origin?』

‘No’, I shook my head, and Krishna-san began to narrate.

『I learned from my research on the Scholomance university of magic that the original word for ‘demon’ apparently comes from the Greek verb for ‘abuse’. In other words, when people looked down on other people, the existence known as ‘demons’ must have been born into this world. It wasn’t that there was an existence somewhere that transcended humanity… nor was it something born to worship God or as an antithesis to God. What I’ve recently come to think… is that they might just have been born purely from within humans.』

『Could that possibly be—?』

I asked.

『The case with the ‘everlasting night stone’?』

In response, Krishna-san tightly pursed her lips, and gave a slight nod thereafter.

『There is nothing in the laws of human thought that goes beyond the principles of life preservation.』

『…Eh?』

『I am not Dr. Freud, but in cases of split personalities, the first personality that manifests: the ‘Id’, is generally held to be a savagely aggressive and an exclusionary personality. The Id is more likely to emerge the more oppressive the environment one finds themselves in, and once it manifests, the Id always unconsciously rejects others— I once wondered if it might be a pure manifestation of life preservation, originally a personality-less ‘superego’. Well, Dr. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious -- in short, the collective

consciousness of an ethnic or religious group that transcends the individual - explains areas that cannot be explained by that theory alone, but when I found about the existence of the ‘everlasting night stone’, I began to feel that the two did not contradict each other. So, returning to my original point… As long as people do not cease abusing other people, then surely, there will always be a possibility that ‘demons’ will be born.』

I couldn’t understand.

But, if Krishna-san’s theory was correct—

Then it meant that as long as people existed, that there would be no salvation?

『Ummm…no, of course, the living are far stronger than the dead.』

Krishna-san raised the tone of her voice to brighten the darkening club room.

『There are countless people who live their lives honestly and sincerely every day, without aiming to become saints or religious people. Which way the future of humanity will turn out depends on those of us living in the present.』

『Yes —you’re right.』

I smiled.

As if induced by my smile, Krishna-san too broke into a smile—

After that she folded her arms behind her back, and closed her eyes if reflecting on that smile.

At that moment—

It felt as if the lights in the clubroom dimmed for an instant, and I looked up at the ceiling. The fluorescent light bulb of the clubroom was working properly, and there seemed to be nothing wrong, so I returned my gaze and saw—

『In summary, aren't humans themselves the 'demons'?』

There stood Ayana Takamura.

『…Is what Kurimoto-kun probably wanted to say. You seemed to have noticed it as well.』

Before I'd realized, Ayana Takamura was wearing Krishna-san's summer checked shirt, but her face, height, and body was her own, and she had a complacent smile on her face.

I merely nodded. I listened carefully to the words that came from her red mouth without being perturbed as to what was happening and without asking for an explanation.

『Have you heard ever of the 'Qumran sect'? They have an interesting contradiction in that they believe that Jesus Christ himself was not a Christian, but a Jew, among other things, they also believe that he was a part of the Jewish Essenes—in short, it is a doctrine that believes he was a part of the 'Qumran sect'. Their teachings are quite unusual. In that Book of Genesis, it is written, 'In the beginning there was darkness' which is the opposite of countless religions. Then, God created light. If darkness was the origin, and chaos was the beginning of this world, doesn't that mean that God is in no way an ally of humanity, nor a guide, but exists to weed out the 'demons' of man? If that's the case, then you can understand why Jesus died on the cross as a symbol of humanity, and why natural disasters have not disappeared from the world.』

Takamura immediately sat directly on top of the work desk, and happily crossed her long legs.

I gazed at her—and after a while, I asked.

『Did you, understand everything?』

『By everything, you mean?』

『The current situation, all of it.』

Ayana Takamura let out a giggle, and she spoke with a smile, ‘Well yeah’.

『Do you plan on becoming a bigger monster than the ‘everlasting night stone’?』

When I asked her that, Takamura’s large eyes widened, and she looked at me in exasperation.

『Monster? Ha—do you think I would aim for something so small time?』

『…Small time?』

『That thing was never an ancient thing to begin with, Nagito Yamada. It was something that merely professed to be ancient—a ghost that must have been born somewhere in the closing years of the Taishō era [20] at best. In every age, the smaller they are, the larger they will try to portray themselves as. But you see, ghosts merge with other ghosts. And in the end, they turn into something so large that they become unable to remember who they originally were. Darkness, abyss, chaos—it was certainly something that could no longer be called a person when it merged with them. It was merely something that called itself that delusional memory of the past. In that sense—that child was at a much higher level. To think that she made me devour that strange thing.』

Thereafter, Takamura narrowed her eyes nostalgically.

『Yoishi Mitsurugi a.k.a Miko Hanamura must have taken a gamble. Perhaps she had a plan in mind when she once declared that I would devour your fears. She would draw the ‘everlasting night stone’ to the limits of her heart and your heart, and the moment it was convinced of victory, she would turn the tables. She showed it something it itself did not understand, put fear in it, and made me devour it---a truly terrifying child.』

Takamura smiled happily, as if boasting about a lost friend.

『But you see Nagito Yamada. It was not something that child could have done had she not truly believed in you. That person won’t

betray me to a fearsome degree- was it? Fufufu, I saw all of it. Those words, which you might not receive even if you were to live for thousands of years, there are truly no higher words of praise, right?』

Yeah, I nodded, and at the same time—

The tears that gathered in my eyes were about to spill, but I somehow managed to endure it.

Did she try not to look at me while I was that way?

『But—'incarnation', was it?』

Takamura spoke as she chuckled.

『I'm not one to speak having tried it once in the past—but, I can't say I didn't understand how it felt. It longed for 'death'. You humans are nothing but afraid of your limited lives, but to something that walked in everlasting darkness, it is a word filled with endless comfort.』

『To die?』

『Ahh, that's right. Well, to all of you who are trying your best to live now, that might be something difficult to comprehend.』

Takamura, looked up as if seeing through the ceiling, the sky above it —no, even higher, into space.

『The structure of this vast cosmos you see, is far more profound than you all believe, and frighteningly simple. In all probability, the first ones who will realize the truth behind that structure will not be physicists or mathematicians, but humans who are called imprudent phenomenologists. There lies the potential of humanity. That is what I felt when I met that child.』

I had no idea what she meant.

I didn't understand, but—it was as if it was fine that I didn't understand. The moment you to try and unravel the mysteries of this world, something would end up shifting slightly out of place. It felt if I were to continue my thoughts in the direction of that deviation,

then the world would branch off at that moment. It was probably a world of multidimensions and parallel universes—My thoughts wouldn't be able to keep up with that, they would get punctured to begin with.

『Now then.』

Thereupon, Takamura leapt off the work desk and stood on the ground.

『Let's finish things there. Since I've been forbidden from following you around. I keep my promises.』

And after saying that,

『It's been fun, Nagito Yamada.』

And she held out her long white fingers towards me.

After thinking it through—I shook my head, and declined to shake her hand.

『Don't want to get along--? Fufufu, that's just like you.』

The moment her red lips opened in a grin, and I felt I was being swallowed by that mouth—

I suddenly came back to my senses. 『…Say, are you listening to me, Nagi-kun?』

There stood Krishna-san, with her smooth bobbed hair, and she held her finger pointed towards me.

『Eh……Aah…..yes, of course.』

I didn't immediately grasp hold of the situation, but--

Nevertheless, I was in the clubroom. Takamura's presence was nowhere to be found.

『In short, humans are all driven by monsters in our unconscious.』

I nodded for the time being, as I wondered what she was talking about.

『Looking at this letter I received, Takita-san probably foresaw that he wouldn't return alive. He had written in detail about the bitter trials experienced by Miko Hanamura over the past eleven years, but that's fine. Read it later if you feel like it. It's also a letter of apology. He truly apologizes for that day in the mansion, for being prepared to do the worst possible thing: using our bodies to make the 'everlasting night stone' feel the concept of death, but—Hm? But if we had died, then we wouldn't have received it, right?』

『Ah, sure.』

I suddenly became nostalgic upon remembering the face of that that careless, aloof man.

『He is truly, loose in the head somewhere.』

I unintentionally ended up referring to him in the present tense, maybe because Sako still lived inside me.

Krishna-san too smiled seeming somewhat lonely, and, continued as if a bit perplexed.

『But you know, here's what I don't quite understand. The reason why he concluded the letter with this…Well, okay, I'll read it from there anyway so listen.』

--*Cough*, Krishna-san cleared her throat once, and began to read aloud.

『'To not lose, is to fight. There is no contest without it. If you fight, you will not lose. You will never win. Humans can never win. They just don't lose.' ….Wait, I think… I know this from somewhere.』

…….Hm?

I thought I heard it somewhere before as well.

『Sorry, it goes on. 'Don't even think about winning. There's no chance you will win. Who, or what are you trying to win against?' –

Ah, I remember! Isn't this Ango?!』

Krishna-san suddenly yelled as if a weight were lifted off her shoulders.

『--Ango?』

『That's right, It's a passage from Sakaguchi Ango's 『The delinquent boy and Christ』.』

Sakaguchi Ango—ahh, now I remember. If I recall correctly, he was Sako's favorite author in his high school days—and, the words at the end Krishna-san read just now were also his last words.

『Krishna-san, that… was something Sako muttered in the mansion.』

I talked about the last moments of his life,

『Only the part at the end--? Ahh…I see.』

Krishna-san spoke after biting her lips once.

『Maybe he was trying to anger you.』

…Eh?

『Back then, if your heart were to collapse, and Miko Hanamura's heart were to collapse, then the 'everlasting night stone' would have won. He played the part of the clown on purpose in order to encourage your spirit. If you were to think that he shamefully 'ran away', you would get angry. You, the simpleton would be outraged, thinking that you were not like him, and that alone would prevent the 'everlasting night stone' from interfering—That's what he might have thought.』

『…That's.』

Back then, I had no time to be angry or sad.

I was merely flailing around in a miserable state of confusion over Sako's death.

『Nagi-kun, you might not believe it, but Takita-san really thought highly of you.』

Krishna-san spoke as if appealing to the depths of my eyes.

『Humans are weak—extraordinarily weak. That was Takita-san's pet theory, but that was the reason why he liked Ango so much. In the 'Discourse on decadence', it is written as such if I remember correctly: – 'Humans will always fall, but they will never be able to fall completely. It is because humans are not strong enough to fall completely.' Your tendency to be attentive to other people's hearts to a foolish degree was highly appreciated by Takita-san. I think he believed that this quality, which worried me so much, was the only thing that could save those who were falling. Even though you can never win, you never lose—he saw the true nature of a struggling human being within you.』

『…I』

Thereupon, I managed to put it into words at last.

『Despite that, I—let Miko die.』

Anger had been smoldering deep in my heart since that incident. Anger at myself that was so intense that when I started to think about it, it drove me crazy and burned my stomach. Anger at my own incompetence. It made me raise my head once more— only to hang it back down and clench my teeth.

『Nagi-kun.』

Thereupon, Krishna-san spoke. 『I believe you might be mistaken, that is why I explained this story.』

『…Eh?』

『I want you to calm yourself and listen to me. Miko Hanamura, died eleven years ago.』

『…….』

『The moment she became Yoishi Mitsurugi, Miko Hanamura had

already died.』

『…..No…..but……』

『She had already been deprived of the people precious to her, and was made to believe she was born cursed—her spirit had died. Her body lived on, but from that day on, she merely lived as if she were dead. Even so, the only reason she remained in this world was to seal the ‘everlasting night stone’ in her body so that it would not spread any further. Just thinking about how painful and lonely that path must have been is enough to clog up your chest—but, even so, there was still one hope for such a girl. In the hellish days eleven years ago, there was only one thing that continued to snuggle close to her: a stuffed frog—the soul that resided within it. In Takito-san’s letter, he said that it might have been you, but…. I don’t know. I don’t know how such a thing would even be possible, and no matter how far one goes, one could never know. It’s just that--』

Thereupon, Krishna-san grasped my arm with her soft hands, and declared while massaging it.

『There’s one thing I can say with certainty. It’s that if the thing that existed inside the stuffed eleven years ago—and you, in the present, had abandoned her even once, the ‘everlasting night stone’ would have incarnated itself in this world.』

『…….』

『This photograph you brought back from that mansion.』

Krishna-san picked up the polaroid photograph of Miko Hanamura in the past that was placed on the work desk.

『I’ve seen a lot of ghost photography up until now, but I’ve never seen once that gives me so much courage. You who are projected on the edge—It’s not desire, reward, or narcissism that can make a face like this. It’s a face that can only be made by someone with a sense of duty, a face that says that you were born for that very reason.』

Finally, the tear glands of Krishna-san burst open.

As large tear drops flowed down her soggy face, she desperately

continued to speak without even trying to wipe them away.

『I was always afraid of you getting involved with Yoishi. I always thought that Yoishi Mitsurugi's darkness was too huge for anyone to face. But, you were different. The inclination in you was growing, and even though the paranormal events kept increasing in purity, you somehow continued to associate with Yoishi. I thought it wasn't good for you—but it felt as if two souls that had split apart had a chance encounter once more, cuddling close to each other. I lost track of many things, and that was my hesitation, and because of that hesitation, I was taken advantage of—but, now that it's all over, I am convinced that my premonition was correct. Miko Hanamura had died once and transformed into a living dead person named Yoishi Mitsurugi who wandered this world. But having met you, having regained the name of Miko Hanamura, wasn't she finally able to rest at peace? Didn't she see that life, and that humans, weren't so bad? You never betrayed Yoishi Mitsurugi. You never ran away. That's why, you don't need to blame yourself. No more…』

Having desperately expressed herself that far,

『There was nothing more you could have done.』

Krishna-san finished speaking, and covered her face with both hands as she broke down in tears.

I was—

Merely repeating the words Krishna-san had said in my foggy head.

I certainly wavered in the face of two choices at that time. If 'Yoishi Mitsurugi' were to stay as she were, we could stay together. But I felt that if I returned her to 'Miko Hanamura', she would disappear. I didn't know which was right. But I indeed ended up making the choice that kept her smiling. And, the words Krishna-san was trying so hard tried to tell me was -- The wind that blows through your chest is making you lonely, and you're sad that you lost her, but isn't it alright since you made her happy—? I finally understood what she was trying to tell me.

And as I looked at the petite, former occult site manager who was

crying like a child in front of me—

The words she had said just now, 『There was nothing more you could have done.』, felt similar to the words Takamura spoke, 『There are truly no higher, words of praise, right?』. At the same time, I finally realized after all this time where Krishna-san got her boyish way of speaking from.

--Ayana Takamura is still alive and well in this person.

At the same time, I felt something cold go down my spine.

Takamura's 'vessel' which 'Yoishi' once spoke of.

Could it be that it wasn't 'Takako Takamura' she was speaking of—

『……』

Thereupon, I shook my head.

No—that's not it. Under the rubble, Miko imparted it to me.

「Ghosts, yōkai, monsters and everything else simply existed. They simply existed—but the moment humans feared them, they might have turned into monsters.」

If I were to explain that conversation in medical terms, it must have been an auditory hallucination in my half-conscious state, but even so, they were precious words given to me by Miko.

All things circle around. They circle around, and are simply there.

Even Takamura, Krishna-san and Sako.

Yes— everyone, including me, is simply part of that flow.

『--That's right, Miko.』

『……Eh?』

I ended up muttering unintentionally, and Krishna-san turned to me

with a face messed up with tears and snot.

I handed her the box of tissues that was there, and smiled, “It’s nothing.”

『By the way, Krishna-san.』

『….Hm?』

She took a deep sniff, as the former occult site manager looked up at me.

『When are you coming back as an occult site manager? Everyone is waiting, you know.』

『……』

『The living—are far stronger-- right?』

Krishna-san glared at me annoyed, and spoke.

『When it feels that way, that’s when. I need to be ready.』

I was satisfied with her answer.

『Nagi-kun.』

It was Krishna-san’s turn to ask me as I put my backpack on my shoulder.

『You’ll come back… won’t you?』

Those words stabbed my chest.

Come back—where?

Where was I supposed to come back to….?

I was suddenly enveloped with a feeling of loneliness as if I didn’t know where I was, but—

However, I deliberately smiled, and spoke, 『Of course.』

『Alright—okay. I'll be waiting.』

Krishna-san smiled happily like a child.

○

Once I arrived in Fujieda, I proceeded to my house, greeted my father and elder sister, was mobbed by the people in the neighborhood who had taken care of me since I was a child, shook off my friends who had begun to crowd around me, and got on the bus.

It wasn't that far. The mountain was around fifteen minutes to the north.

It was a small mountain about a hundred meters above sea level that had long been known and loved by the people of Fujieda as Mount Eboshi.

I had promised Miko when she was still Yoishi that I would show it to her one day.

The sun was hotter than usual this year. As soon as I got off the bus, I walked under a myriad of trees. As a cool breeze blew down from the foot of the mountain, I pushed my way into the entrance of the mountain. I continued to climb up the narrow game trail that was around less than a meter wide as I wiped the sweat off my face.

I didn't look back on the way up. To really enjoy it you needed to see it when you reached the summit—I replenished myself with the plastic bottle at times as I continued to climb. I used to come here when I was a kid quite often and had always underestimated it, but visiting it now, I found it to be quite steep. I put my feet on the roots of the trees peeking out from the soil, and made my way steadily up the slope, step by step.

And, in less than twenty minutes—I finally reached the summit.

I lowered my backpack, and took out a small cremation urn and that stuffed frog. It was one part of the cremated ashes I had received of

Miko Hanamura, and her precious ‘friend’.

“Look, see? This is Mount Eboshi. Amazing, isn’t it?”

I somehow managed to wring out my voice, and swung around at once.

It was—a scene far more spectacular than the one in my memory.

Mount Fuji soared over at the eastern side, and Fujieda city looked small in the bird’s-eye view down below. Beyond that, the ocean spread out, and the curve of the hazy Suruga Bay covered everything in a haze. On the horizon, gigantic columns of clouds billowed. To the trained eye, it might have been seen as nothing more than an insignificant little mountain in the sticks. But it had everything. The sky, the sea, the greenery, Mt. Fuji, and the city— all of these elements were indispensable to each other, miraculously forming a single landscape.

“My mother taught me about this place. Whenever I come here, I feel that everyone is not alone.”

Saying that, I placed the funerary urn gently on the ground, and propped the stuffed frog next to it.

And, I too, sat down next to them.

I thought I would talk about a lot of things with Miko here, but—nothing came out.

The view was far more eloquent than my boring speeches. I felt like Miko was telling me countless precious things that were unspoken.

“It’s nice to be under the sun, isn’t it?”

Despite that, I still tried to speak to her at times.

“Somehow, I feel like I only ever went to dark places with you, huh?”

The wind blew through me, but no answer came.

It was only in times like this that I thought I knew what I would say

to Miko.

But, strangely enough, nothing came out. Telling her I missed her would be uncool, apologizing felt wrong as well, and thanking her felt a little out of place as well. There were just… too many different kinds of emotions that came pouring out, and I couldn't translate them into words.

I merely stayed silent—and before I knew it, an hour had passed.

Although it was still hot, the strength of the sunlight had diminished.

I got up and pulled out a small shovel from the bottom of the backpack. I then thrust it at the base of a large camphor tree that my mother loved so dearly. I dug a hole as deep as I could there so as to not damage the roots. When my surroundings began to turn orange, I managed to dig a hole around a meter deep, and I softly placed the funerary urn and the stuffed frog in it. I thought I should say something, but I could not. All I could do was hold back the tears that were threatening to overflow the best I could.

After I carefully finished covering the hole with soil, I poured the remaining water from the plastic bottle on it.

I then closed my eyes, and clasped my hands toward the trunk of the camphor tree.

Countless memories drew themselves in the back of my eyelids. I engraved them all with none to spare into my chest, and simply declared as if to escape, “I’ll be back”, and took a few steps down the path—

That wind blew through me.

You are strong.

I picked up a nostalgic voice in the wind, stopping my breath, stopping my feet.

I understand.

The reason you came here.

How much your mother must have loved you.

Nagito(凪人) means

A person who is calm at all times.

A person who can treat everyone equally.

That was the name she wished for you.

The wind blows across me.

Under my feet, towards the sky, scattering the voice as it continues to rise.

To bear a child.

Was to live life anew.

Your mother lived once more through your eyes.

I wondered if it was alright to keep on living.

I wondered if it was alright that I had been born.

It was a question I kept asking myself.

And yet.

I was named Miko.

It was a name I was christened with.

You helped me find the meaning of that.

The moment I met Mr. Frog.

I felt relieved somehow.

I only thought that invisible things were simply something to be afraid of.

If you hadn't been the first ghost I saw.

I'm sure I would have given up on everything much sooner.

Even if I were to suddenly throw up.

Even if I didn't take a bath.

You always tried to see the shape of my heart.

That was not easy.

Not something anyone could do.

To bear children.

And to pour your love into them.

Was a truly a wonderful thing.

「Thank you.」

Now.

At this moment where my existence fades away.

That's all I can think to say.

The words I wanted to say for a long long time

The words I should have said far sooner.

I loved you.

That’s why, from now on.

Like your mother.

I’ll become a being that prays for your happiness.

I was at the end of my patience.

I was about to turn around, about to answer that voice, when—

「It's 'forbidden' to look.」

A shiver ran down my spine, as a nostalgic whisper reached my ears.

You shouldn't involve yourself in the world beyond any further.

However, I turned around.

I had no regrets.

Even if the chapter of my life were to close here--- even if the darkness of the world beyond were to spread before my eyes once more.

I silently turned my body around, and faced the owner of that voice.

In an instant, her face, like a weeping smile, fills my retinas.

The wind swept through me.

A magnificent blue peeked through the rift between the golden clouds.

You.

Really are.

With those words as her last--

She melted away into the blue sky on the other side.

Goodbye, Thank you.

The next time we meet --- will be in the world beyond.

And, when I join hands with her, I will tell all of you.

With everything I have in my heart, I will say it to you:

WELCOME.
TO THE
WORLD
ON THIS SIDE
THE END OF THE WORLD

Afterword

After finishing the 『Phenomeno』 series, I realized that the simple textual medium of 'novels' were far deeper than I imagined. For the past few years, the more I wrote, the more I became afraid of 'novels'. But one day, I asked a certain respected author, "Why is it that the first draft is so exhausting?"

After a moment of silence, the author eventually muttered a short reply, "Isn't it because If one were to cut corners, then there would be no end to it?" His expression was etched with the somber shadow of a person who had gone through 'the fight of never cutting corners' many times, however at that moment, I thought to myself for the first time, "I too wanted to try and live in the same place this person stood." Ever since my accidental debut, I had always thought that I wouldn't be around next year, and often thought about running away, but that was the moment when I felt for the first time that "I loved novels."

There are countless people I have to thank for this work, but along with thanking everyone who has accompanied me thus far, I would now like to express similar gratitude for this work.

Thank you, Yoishi. Thank you for your hard work, Nagito.

May 2015

Ninomae Hajime

Yoshitoshi Abe

This is based on the first rough sketch of Yoishi I made when I

finished reading the first draft back in September 2011. When I read a text, I have a tendency to see images in my mind that are directly converted from the text, and these images can be like they are from live action, film, painting, manga, and most of all like the hazy scene of a dreamscape. It might differ based on the text I'm reading, but after reading through Phenomeno once, I had the impression that my sketch directly depicted it. It was a slightly strange sensation which I remember even now: not just your writing, but your drawing can also come at you with the feeling that it was not done by you. But, when I actually tried to draw the image with my hands, I often times felt frustrated that my hand couldn't catch up with the image I had, even though I had the correct interpretation in my mind, and I had to redraw the image several times compared to my other works. When I finished the cover to the first volume and saved it, I looked at it again after a while, and when the difference between the image and the one in my head weighed on my mind, I touched it up more….And I repeated the process 13 times. The illustrations in the first volume were also exactly the same assembled line drawings that had to be discarded after being completed once, and were redrawn all over again.

I believe that this sense of groping around aiming for the correct interpretation that my unconsciousness launched into, in the end they successfully accompanied the atmosphere of this work.

Afterword To The Afterword

I began to write this work simply because I liked the occult genre, but before I realized, it brought me a treasure trove of encounters.

Yoshitoshi Abe, who I had been a big fan of since ‘Serial Experiments Lain’, became in charge of the illustrations, The editor-in-chief of the magazine ‘Faust’ that was like a coursebook in novels for me, Katsushi Ota-san, became my editor in chief. In addition, the assistant editor Hirabayashi-san, Yamanaka-san who was in charge of the ‘New Moon Reading Hall’ event, Ishikawa-san who was in charge of the paperback edition, all the staff involved in the making of the visual novel version(I was able to work with everyone from nitroplus for the first time), the booksellers who supported me, the countless literary personalities who enthusiastically introduced the book in various media, Ellis-san of Schatzkiste who supported me in all kinds of ways, all the distinguished eminent persons who added their generous words to the paperback edition—

And most of all, the greatest encounter of all with all the readers who have taken the time to read this far.

I’d like to thank you once more.

Reading it back now, I believe there’s a long list of sentences that were unskillfully written, but at any rate, I desperately got through what was a true-to-life work that represented me in those days. I feel that the speed and earnestness of this work is not something that I will be able to aim for and write like in the future.

When I stand by the riverside at night, I can(somehow) feel the existence of something unworldly, and each time, I ask myself.

Did I succeed in portraying one part of you all?

Was it alright that I wrote it like that?

There was no answer of course, but instead, I realized that what I once always feared, now felt like a dear friend. It might have been thanks to this work.

And with that, I pray that we will soon meet again in a different work--

May 2016

Ninomae Hajime

Bonus Story: What was in the tunnel

I'd like to tell a ghost story on Twitter to commemorate the completion of "Phenomeno." Please lend me your TL for a while. The story is named " What was in the tunnel."

I heard this story from my friend T in college.

T had a family friend, Mr. N, whom T had known since he was in elementary school. It seems the man often spoiled him. One day, however, uncle N was involved in a car accident and was hospitalized with serious injuries.

Surprised, T went to visit him, and was surprised to find him in better shape than he was expecting. T was so relieved he forgot he was in the hospital and started pleading, "Uncle N, tell a scary story!"

Usually, N would say, "All right, all right, I'll tell you one," and start telling a lot of stories, but that day, he fell silent.

After a while, N curtly said, "I could tell you one, but I don't know if now is the right time."

T was still curious and continued pestering the uncle, but the man was unyielding.

"Maybe one day, when you're older."

When T became a university student, he had a chance to meet uncle N for the first time in years.

He hadn't forgotten about uncle's promise, so he asked, "That scary

story you told me about when you were in the hospital long ago? Can you tell it now?"

The uncle, who had been cheerful until then, suddenly clouded his face and said,

"Well, I can tell you, but you should know that I haven't wrapped my head around it myself yet," he said.

It happened on the day of the accident. Mr. N had gone golfing with four coworkers. On the way home, Mr. N was in the front passenger seat with one of the coworkers at the wheel and two bosses in the back. However, just as they were approaching a particular tunnel, they were caught in a traffic jam.

They stared at the tail light of the car in front of them, "It's not moving. Must be an accident..."

Just after those words were uttered, something strange happened.

Suddenly, the whole area went completely dark. N said that all the lights in the tunnel had gone out, and it was so dark he couldn't even see his fingers.

".....Ugh," an unfamiliar voice, not one of their own, could be heard in the darkness.

"Power outage....?" asked someone sounding slightly frightened. It was pitch dark, but Mr. N soon realized that something wasn't right. If the lights in the tunnel went out due to a power outage, why would the tail lights of the car in front of them go out as well?

For a while, an uncomfortable silence prevailed. Mr. N said that the reason no one said anything was because they all felt the situation wasn't exactly normal.

Only the sound of ragged breathing echoed through the car. However, inaction wouldn't solve anything, so Mr. N used the lighter he had found in his pocket.

As soon as the flame ignited...

"Ugh!"

The four of them simultaneously screamed. Behind the windshield, lit by the light of a lighter, several bloody people were clinging to each other. Some of them had countless shards of glass stuck all over their faces. Startled, N dropped the lighter, the fire went out, and the car went back into darkness again.

"What the hell was that?!" the boss's trembling voice resounded from the back seat. "Should I try again?" asked Mr. N, but no answer followed. They were scared shitless, not wanting to see that horrible sight again. They were only human after all, with pitiable expressions on their blue scared faces at that.

However, Mr. N took the lighter and tried to light it again. That very moment, a loud horn sounded from somewhere. In just a moment, the tunnel lights were on, and there were no cars in front of them. Before long, the traffic was clearing up, and they realized the car behind was vigorously honking its horn.

The colleague hurriedly drove off. After a while, he said, "...What the heck was that I wonder?"

"What were those bloody people we saw I don't know till this day," Mr. N told T with an awkward smile.

After hearing this story from T, I went on a certain occult site and made a thread about it, but didn't receive the reaction I was expecting.

"What's scary about it?"

"It's so common I heard it a million times already."

Those were the replies I was getting.

I felt down and was about to leave the site for the day when someone with a nickname Yoishi wrote their reply.

"The story omits the real ending."

What?..

"Hey, didn't you notice?"

N-notice what?..

"The story starts with the uncle N getting in a car accident, right?"

I don't know why, but the moment I read the message, I felt goosebumps all over my body.

"It means he got in an accident soon after seeing those bloody people in the tunnel."

"And he was so badly injured he was hospitalized."

"Someone who's usually more than willing to tell a scary story has been immensely shocked by something."

"Well, that's because... he knew that the "bloody humans" they saw looked exactly like them from the future."

I couldn't take my eyes off of this person's strange handle name and their messages.

"Who the hell are you?" That was the only question on my mind, but I couldn't even ask it.

"Listen..."

"Next time you see Mr. T, ask him."

"Is the car that Mr. N was driving still around? And..."

After a short pause, the next message arrived.

"If any of his colleagues or superiors are still alive."

The end.

Thanks for your time!

'Phenomeno' is a collection of similar stories (although there's about one heroine mixed in there).

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Apparently refers to the point of contact between valleys, a low point absent of 'qi', points which are said to be unlucky and prone to disaster.
2. ↑ His nickname means silkworm
3. ↑ https://daitool.com/blogs/news/all-about-nata-the-japanese-axe-or-is-it-a-machete
4. ↑ The kanji used here is魔, the 'ma' in 'mahoutsukai' which can mean witch, demon, evil spirit or evil influence.
5. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oshira-sama
6. ↑ (expl.) the air or energy flowing down from an undulating mountain range
7. ↑ https://d-museum.kokugakuin.ac.jp/eos/detail/?id＝9644
8. ↑ long, narrow banner attached to a pole on one side and a horizontal rod along the top
9. ↑ Monthly death anniversaries of a death are known as tsuki meinichi in Japan
10. ↑ https://kappapedia.blogspot.com/2015/01/kappa-jizo.html
11. ↑ https://donnykimball.com/kimon-7f7a28291d51
12. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futsunushi
13. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%8Ckuninushi
14. ↑ The kanji for Sako's first name is 左居, with the first kanji meaning left and the next one meaning to be or exist, so Sako means being at the left.
15. ↑ As explained in the previous volume, he is asking how the kanji is written here.
16. ↑ Buddhist prayer
17. ↑ Black cap https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E7%83%8F%E5%B8%BD%E5%AD%90
18. ↑ https://www.narahaku.go.jp/english/collection/665-0.html
19. ↑ (Buddh) nine-character charm chanted with ritual gestures to ward off evil (esp. by mountain ascetics and adherents of

Esoteric Buddhism)
20. ↑ Taishō era (1912.7.30-1926.12.25)